My Guide to Teaching Writing

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Abstract

This project is a guide to teaching writing at the high school level. It includes exercises and projects to use in the classroom to help students become better writers. The writing samples consist of ways to get ideas flowing, how to help students become confident writers, writing essays, creative writing, factual writing, writing autobiographies, and writing poetry. For each exercise, examples are provided to demonstrate how the assignment should be completed.
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Prologue

As a child, I always told my mom that I wanted to be a teacher. My sisters and I played school every day, and I developed a love for it at a very young age. As I grew up, I worked in daycare, summer camps, and I have babysat and substitute taught for all ages, from infants to kids at the high school level. English has always been my favorite and strongest subject, which is why I wish to teach it in the future.

As a writer, I have tried many approaches to better my writing—exercises, activities, free writes; many which I have found useful. I would like to take what I have learned and share it with students of my own one day, and hopefully fellow teachers, as well.

My thesis project is my guide to teaching writing at the high school level. It includes exercises and projects for teachers, most of them created by me, to use in the classroom to help students become better writers. For each exercise I created, I gave an example of how a student would complete it. These writing approaches have improved my writing tremendously over the years, and have helped me in the classroom when I have trouble getting started.

My project consists of seven parts:

* Ways to get your ideas flowing
* How to help your students become confident writers
* Writing essay
* Creative writing
* Writing autobiographies
A student learns all these things throughout his/her four years in high school.

In order for students to enjoy writing, a teacher must have an interesting and enjoyable approach, which is what I want to bring to my future students. If students can enjoy writing, they will do it well and be successful writers. I believe the purpose of this guide is to help students find that joy in writing.
Part 1

Getting Your Brain in Gear

Warming-Up Your Brain

In order to teach students how to write, it is important that they be ready to write. When I first pick up a pen, my mind is all over the place. I often find myself staring at a blank sheet paper or computer screen, saying to myself, “I don’t know what to write.” This is how a lot of students’ brains are when they sit down in the beginning of class: scattered.

When this happens, the best way for me to get my brain in gear is to “free write,” or write quickly off the top of my head. I often find myself free writing about things that are not even related to what I should be writing about, but it gets my brain warmed up and makes writing my paper a little easier. When you free write, your brain often reveals good ideas that you weren’t previously aware of.

In the beginning of class, put a topic on the board such as “hats.” Have your students write whatever they want about hats for five minutes. What they write doesn’t have to be English related, because remember, this is an exercise to get their brains going. Tell them to write continuously for the whole five minutes without putting down their pen. They don’t need to make the writing sound wonderful, and they don’t have to worry about punctuation. All they need to do is write what they are thinking. If they can’t think of something to write, have them write “I don’t know what to write.” This type of exercise is not to be graded, but is to trigger the minds of your students so they are more focused for the class.
Here is an example of a free write on hats:

I like to wear hats—not every day, but once in a while. Although I have a lot of hats, the only one I usually wear around is my Red Sox cap. I like wearing it because they’re my favorite team, and whenever I go to wear a different hat, I always end up resorting to my B. I live with four Yankee fans, so I usually get teased when I wear it, but I must say I am used to that! The only other hat that I think I wear is my cowboy hat. I have two of them, actually. I’m a big country fan, so I like to wear them when I go to country concerts. I bought my first one when I went to see Kenny Chesney a few years ago. The hats look cute with my boots, but I don’t think I’d ever wear them out for fun. I wear it to be festive. Not like I would be out of place if I wore it out though, because I’m from the valley and it is like country central out there. I’d still rather wear my Boston hat any day.

In the free write above, I was able to write the first things that came to my mind. Because I wasn’t able to put down my pen and think about what to write next, I was able to actually write what my brain wanted to say. What I wrote is for me, only, and I can use it however I please. My brain feels like it is flowing better than it was earlier, and now I’m not staring at an empty sheet of paper.

Get Acquainted with Your Thoughts

When I’m in class and a teacher brings up a new topic to discuss (even one I already know about), I often feel put on the spot if I’m asked a question right away, and I have trouble answering. If my teacher gives me time to think about my answer instead of having me answer right away, I will be able to explain my thoughts and
answers to the class.

Before discussing a topic in class, have you students write a paragraph of what they already know about the subject. Doing this will focus the students’ attention on the subject and they will have some of what they know about it right in front of them, making it easier to bring up points in discussion. This exercise will get students concentrated on the subject while practicing writing at the same time. Here is an example of a free write that a student might do if the discussion in class was going to be about the Renaissance:

*The Renaissance occurred during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. The transition of the Middle Ages to modern times happened during this time. It began in Italy and spread throughout Europe. The Renaissance means “rebirth.” Shakespeare was a writer in the Renaissance period. The printing press was created during the Renaissance.*

**Voice Your Opinion Rather than Debate It**

When a debatable question is brought up in class, I tend to feed off what my classmates say as we discuss it. As a result, I do not develop my own opinion. However, if I were to stop and write down my own ideas before discussing the topic, I would have my own opinion written right in front of me. I would be able to discuss (or write about) my own ideas, in relation to my classmates.

When a student presents a debatable argument, have him stop to write a short paragraph so he can see the pros and cons in his argument. He will be able to see what he likes or dislikes, and his opinion will be written in front of him. The students
can voice their opinions to the class without being persuaded before they even speak. Also, if you give your students a writing assignment on the argument, they will have at least some of their reasons written down, and will be able to write about them freely.

Here is an example of a paragraph on the debatable topic, “Who is truly the jealous character in *Othello* and why?”

*Although Iago and Roderigo are both jealous characters, Iago is the truly jealous character. The play begins by discussing Roderigo’s jealousy, that Othello has married Desdemona. However, it is indirectly stated that Iago is the jealous character because he is selfish and turns everybody against each other. Iago “helps” Roderigo try to get revenge, but really, Iago is the one who is jealous of Othello and Cassio. His jealousy starts when Othello makes Cassio Lieutenant him, so he used the other characters in the play to try and get his way, making Othello give higher rank to him over Cassio. Roderigo’s jealousy is small, but Iago’s jealousy is big—and everywhere throughout the play. Because of his jealous actions, people are killed. Roderigo’s jealousy wouldn’t have (really) killed anybody, had Iago not been there to “help.”*

**Refresh Your Mind**

With about two minutes left of class, I’m usually ready to head for the door. But if I take the time to review quickly about what I learned in the past 45 minutes, I’ll be more than likely to remember what I learned than if I rushed out.

At the end of each class period with about two minutes remaining, have
students jot down major points or principles they learned that day in class. If they do this, they’ll be running it through their mind one last time before they leave. The material learned will be fresh in their head’s for the next day or for homework given that night.

Here is an example of a post class summary in a fiction writing class.

*Today we shared our fiction stories with each other. The important thing about writing fiction is to get the reader's attention and make the story interesting. Use description so they can get a good picture of the characters and be able to develop a relationship with them. It’s best to cut out extra words so the story doesn’t become boring and drag on. Be aware of the tense—don’t go back and forth between active and passive voice. Dialogue should sound real.*
Motivate the Discouraged

Motivation is the key to being successful in anything in life. If you’re not motivated to stay on a diet, you won’t lose weight. If you’re not motivated to go to the gym, you won’t get in shape. **If you’re not motivated to work hard in the classroom, you won’t get good grades.**

Being positive with your students gives them the courage they need, without even realizing it. They enjoy optimistic feedback because if they know they are doing well in class, they will try to maintain the good grades they have already achieved. They will go a step further to be a better student.

It is important, though, to not push your students to unattainable goals. They will gain false courage, and eventually become frustrated or disappointed in themselves. In the long run they will think they failed and will possibly lose hope for anything else they need to complete for your class.

Here is an excerpt from a sample of my writing that was written with enthusiasm for an Anthropology class on the community service I had to complete. When my teacher first assigned 15 hours of community service, it sounded like a lot, but my teacher encouraged me to volunteer someplace where I would enjoy working and learning at the same time. I found myself writing this paper weeks before the due date because I was so into it. Not only was I excited to write it, I received an A-. I was so happy my teacher assigned 15 hours, because it was a reasonable amount of
time, but not too overwhelming. It also allowed me to work with children, which is what I am going to be doing for my career, so I loved it, and thoroughly enjoyed writing the paper.

On my first day volunteering at the WCSU Child Care Center, I was extremely excited to go because I absolutely love children and would like to become a teacher myself one day. When I arrived, some of the children seemed timid toward me, but most of them were overly welcoming. The children were curious of my presence, but very excited to play with me—they let me jump right in! The classroom was decorated with colorful pictures and paintings, and there were different centers for the children to play in.

The group of three and four-year-olds I worked with compose a subculture, which is a group of individuals who share the same age, social status, etc., and has its own interests and goals. The children share common interest, they all have infinite imaginations, love exploring, and most of all, are interested in what each other has to offer. I noticed that children don’t even realize they are part of a subculture, because in their own minds, the world revolves around themselves. They are unaware that the children surrounding them are the same, and are oblivious to the concept of “social groups.” As they played, I decided to observe who chose to work with whom. I found it odd that Caucasian girls often chose not to work with black children, but all the boys enjoyed playing with everyone. I don’t believe it has anything to do with racism, but that girls are a little more timid than boys, and may feel intimidated by others who are a little different than they are.
Come to Terms of Reality

Frustrated, stressed, competitive, bored, scared, humiliated, sad, angry, violent—just a few words that might describe how a student feels in a classroom. Many students feel uncomfortable if they can not find the right words—they’re not confident in themselves and they fear being criticized.

When a student writes a paper, it is important to focus on his or her strong points, but even more important, it is vital to come to terms with the reality of that student. If the writing is bad, don’t just show the student what she did well, explain to her what she can improve on, because the good parts of her paper are already there. Admiring it for her will not better the paper. But remember to be encouraging! If you are, then your students will take your advice with an open mind. Show them how you want to help them—don’t lead them to believe that you are only supposed to be helping them. The more interested you are in their writing, the more they will put into making it better.

Here is an excerpt from a paper I wrote for an English class on a Marxist Society. In bold print below the excerpts are my teacher’s remarks in response to what I wrote. When I read it over, I wasn’t overwhelmed or discouraged, but was happy with what he had to say. Although he may have been criticizing, he was very helpful and encouraging at the same time.

*The functions of Marxist theory in Their Eyes Were Watching God stem deeply from the society that Jody “created.” The binary opposition of rich and poor contrasts greatly between Janie and Jody and the rest of the community. Jody and Janie’s two story home is like a mansion compared to the rest of the families’ homes,*
which look like servant's quarters. Jody's wealth arouses animosity in many of the citizens, but nobody wants to confront Jody because he has “power” and can easily throw anybody he wants out of society if he felt the need to. To the residents, it isn’t something worth fighting about if it can result in losing all they have.

Okay, clearly illustrated. Now what does this all suggest? Remember to support you own thesis. (smiley face)

One thing I found significant in both novels, Their Eyes Were Watching God and The Bluest Eye, was their use of “eyes” toward Marxism. Pecola in The Bluest Eye believed that having different colored eyes would make the rest of the community treat her with the same respect as a white person. The use of eyes in Their Eyes Were Watching God is relevant because Janie Knows that if people really did see through her eyes, they would understand the struggles she has gone through. The community looks down on her for running off with Tea Cake, and coming back to town years later. However, the trust is that they see things the way the “eyes” want to see it.

Okay… now connect this to Marxism, otherwise, it’s just a random point.

Reading these remarks definitely didn’t make me feel like a terrible writer, even though my essay was not well written. My teacher gave me useful tips that helped me expand my paper. His remarks were to the point, but he didn’t write them with bitterness.

Reassure Your Students
I always thought I was a good writer. I’ve always been one of those students who preferred writing a ten page paper over taking a test, any day. I took pride in my writing, since I loved to do it so much, and came into college confident with it.

It wasn’t until my junior year that I realized how much room for improvement there was in my writing. I was in a class called “critical methods” that taught us about theorists and theories, and to be completely honest, I learned more about my writing in that class than I did about theorists. The first paper I wrote was about women and how they struggle with discrimination. Needless to say, it was the first “D” I ever received on a paper. At first I was worried because my second (and final) paper for the semester counted for a big part of my grade. My professor had me meet with her weekly in her office to discuss different ways I could improve my writing. She told me that she thought I was one of the brightest students in our class, but I had trouble putting my ideas into a structured paper. She and I discussed all the parts of my paper that could be improved, and ways to improve them.

When it was time for my second paper, I used the advice she gave me to write it and I ended up with a B-. Because she had reassured me that even though my writing was poor, but able to be improved, the “D” I received on my first paper was no longer a worry for me—I was confident in writing my second paper!

Here are a few examples of some of the things we discussed to help me write better for my second paper.

1. My first paper had major changes of voice. My teacher went through the entire paper with me and showed me each part that displayed active voice,
and each part that displayed passive voice. When I wrote my second paper, I was able to go through it myself to pick out where I accidentally used an inconsistent voice.

2. My thesis was very weak, so she told me that the best way to improve it, was to ask the question “so what?” I learned that the thesis statement of an essay needs to be direct and make precise points. For example, the statement “Men dominate and control the women they love” can become a strong thesis statement if you say “Men who dominate and control the women they love ultimately destroy the relationship they have built together.”

3. I had a bad habit of putting extra words into my papers. As my teacher and I read through my first paper, she cut the word count by a solid twenty-five words, and it was only a two page paper. When I wrote my second paper, I made it a point to try and cut words, so I could figure out where I really did and didn’t need them.
Part 3

Writing Essays without the Struggle

Outline the Facts

The hardest part about writing an essay is knowing the basics and getting started. Sometimes when I have a long essay to write, I jump in front of the computer and try to get started, hoping everything will come to me. What I’ve discovered over the past few years is that the pre-writing process is actually the most important part of writing. Creating some sort of an outline lets me explore my ideas and write them down before I actually get started on the writing itself. It is definitely a lot easier to write an essay if I build an outline first, because my ideas are already there, all I have to do is build off of them.

Have your students create an outline by answering the following questions. Below the question are my own answers that I will use to write a paper on my philosophy of education.

1. What is the question I am going to answer?

2. How can I best answer this question?

3. What is the most important part of my answer?

4. How can I make a thesis?

5. How can I support my thesis?

6. How can I make the essay interesting?

7. Do I need more facts?
1. I am going to answer the question “What is the best way to deliver material to students as a teacher?”

2. I can best answer this question by discussing the importance of communication between teachers and students, the importance of leadership in a classroom, and the actual learning environment (your classroom!) where children sit all day.

3. The most important part of my answer is that the teacher needs to be positive and encouraging in the classroom in order for the students to learn to their full potential. Teachers can’t just educate students, they need to find a way to relate to them.

4. I can make a thesis from this by stating that teachers who are well put together—encouraging, organized, and helpful—will be successful in educating their students.

5. Some facts or ideas I can use to support my thesis are: organization of a classroom, the leadership a teacher must have, communication skills a teacher must have.

6. I can make this essay interesting by using my own views as the main source of information.

Make a Web to String Your Ideas Together

Many students have trouble answering questions before they get started on an essay, and work better if they have something visual in front of them. A web chart is the perfect way for a student to get started because they can jot down and connect any
of the ideas that are bouncing around in their head in an organized way. When they sit down to start writing, they will see their thoughts from a different perspective than if they only answered the questions.

Here is an example of a web chart displaying the same information I used to answer the questions above about teaching.
Parts of an Essay

Once your students have created some type of outline, they are ready to start writing their essays. When writing an essay, it is important to remember the three main parts: the introduction, the supporting paragraphs, and the summary paragraph.

Introduction

The first paragraph of your essay is significant because it introduces the main idea and tells why the topic is important. It is important to capture the reader’s attention in the introduction so they will be interested in reading the rest of the essay! Always remember to include your thesis statement and some background information in the introductory paragraph. Use facts that you’ll discuss later on in your supporting paragraphs.

Supporting Paragraphs

The supporting paragraphs make up the body of the essay and develop the main ideas. For each point that supports the main idea, create a different paragraph and develop it with details, facts and examples. To connect your supporting paragraphs, use transition words such as “however,” “furthermore,” or “consequently,” but remember not to overuse them.

Summary Paragraph

The summary paragraph comes at the end of the essay after you finished developing your ideas and it summarizes the main idea in a way that captures the
richness of the topic the essay has shown, letting the reader know that the essay is complete. Remember to restate the strongest points of your essay and if you would like, give your personal opinion.

Here is a sample essay I wrote using my outline and web chart on teaching.

*In blue, I highlighted my thesis statement.

*In green, I highlighted the supporting facts/concepts.

*In red, I highlighted the examples of my supporting facts.

*In orange, I highlighted the recap of my ideas in the summary paragraph.

*In Purple, I highlighted transition words I used:

_The three most important qualities that are found in an educator are organization, leadership, and communication skills. My philosophy of educations is that teachers who are well put together—encouraging, organized, and helpful—will be successful in educating their students. There are many ways to teach the same material; some teachers prefer to lecture, some would rather do hands-on activities, and some believe in having students read and learn most of the material on their own. All these methods contribute to the learning process, but there are certain aspects that assist a student’s learning that aren’t as obvious._

_The organization of a classroom plays a major role on how the student will learn. If a classroom is very plain with dull or dark surroundings, it is much harder for the student to be attentive and think critically. On the other hand, if a classroom is bright and colorful, a student is more apt to pay attention and understand the material because they are in a positive and happy environment. Classroom organization is also very important because it reflects the teacher._
messy, you seem unorganized. If you seem unorganized, you appear more powerless. However, if a teacher is neat and organized, students will see him or her as a dominant figure, and will pay more attention to the lesson.

Communication and presentation are the key dynamics for a successful classroom. An application of constructivism theory is the best approach to letting students construct their own thoughts in a more complex way, rather than having constantly lecturing them and handing them the information you are teaching. It allows the students’ minds to grow more independently. The best way for students to understand something is if they come up with their own definition, rather than copying the teacher’s. Doing so, they will learn more and become more self-sufficient in the classroom.

In contrast to organization and communication, leadership plays a more veiled role in the classroom. Each one of your students is unknowingly looking up to you. They may not realize the impact you are placing on them, but everything you do affects their behavior and learning ability. If a teacher acts as a worthy, virtuous role model, the students will look up to him or her and have a stronger motivation to do well. Although it is not always “spoken,” students know when teachers have high expectations of them. If, as a teacher, you allow your students to know what you expect of them, they will want to achieve their finest for you. Students look highly upon the fact that a teacher is proud of them when they do well. It motivates them to do better the next time.

Although my views may change as I continue to learn more about being an educator, I will always believe that a student cannot learn if a teacher does not
contribute just as much—even more—as the student every day. A teacher will not be successful if he or she is not organized, doesn’t communicate well with the students, and doesn’t act as a role model. Teaching is a profession where love must be found, and if your heart is not in it, you will not succeed.

**Peer Response Groups**

When I correct my own paper, I often overlook many grammatical errors. Having an extra pair of eyes read it over is always helpful because others find things in my writing that I don’t find myself. They can generate new ideas to better my paper, and they can tell me what I need to cut that is making my paper boring. I have written some of my best papers when I have gotten together with a group or another person to have them review what I have written. Peer conferences are the best way to both correct and improve your work.

Divide your students into small groups. Have them switch papers and critique each others as they read them. Because it can be hard to critique someone else’s paper, whether it be because students don’t know what to say, or they don’t want to hurt each other’s feelings, it may be helpful for your students if you create a guideline for them to follow of questions to answer.

This is an example of a guideline used in my Shakespeare II class at Westconn. One of my classmates used it to critique my paper and it was extremely helpful when it came time for me to write my final draft:

1. *Read the paper once and record your first impression.*

2. *Is there a thesis or a claim? What is it?*
3. Any suggestions for improving the thesis or claim?

4. What are the writer’s main supporting arguments?

5. What can you suggest about reordering and/or improving arguments?

6. What audience is this paper addressing? What about the student’s writing makes it clear or what does the student need to do in order to make it clear?

7. How is the paper appropriate for that target audience?

8. Is the paper topic narrowed sufficiently for the writer to adopt an in-depth analysis/perspective? Why or why not?

9. Where does the writer use effective evidence? Where does the writer use effective details? Mark these sections of the paper with the letters e.e. or e.d.

10. Make an x in the places you believe revision will be helpful.

11. Mark a wavy line next to any part you found confusing on the first reading.

12. Write any further comments or advise you may have for the writer.
Use Real Life to Inspire Creativity

This semester, I am in a Fiction Writing Workshop class and every week we write one piece of flash fiction. The first week of class, our assignment was to write a creative story between 250 and 1000 words. Mine was horrible. It was thought of from the top of my head and I put close to zero descriptive detail in it compared to what I should have.

My professor told me that if I didn’t put creative description into my writing, it would be boring. He said that the best way to make a paper descriptive is to take a real life incident and use it as the foundation of the story. Once I tried it, I was able to put in all type of detail into my characters to make them life like—they had feelings, senses, and thoughts. Because I started writing about things I was familiar with, I was able to go into all types of descriptive detail and give my characters real personalities.

Here is an example of a piece of flash fiction I wrote that was a real life experience of one of my friends in high school. He has described this incident to me so many times, that it is almost real to me. Therefore, I was able to write about it easily and fluidly, and give the character a personality.

*In red, I highlighted any sensations or perceptions my character uses that would make him appear real.
*In blue, I highlighted any feelings my character has that makes him life-like and give him behavior.

_Beads of sweat dripped down my face. I could see my breath. The only noise came from the cheering crowd of blue and gold._

“Let’s go, boys,” I said. “Don’t let these guys beat us on our turf. Get your heads in the game, RIGHT NOW!” I grabbed the facemask of my best friend John’s helmet. “We deserve this. Let’s walk off this field as champions!”

“You know it,” said John as he patted me on the back.

It was the final play. The bulldogs had the ball and were up by six. 73 hiked it. My heart raced and my stomach felt like a knot was tied inside. The opposing quarterback threw the pass toward 11.

I leaped in front and intercepted the ball with an extended right arm. The clock was running out. The crowd wildly roared. The only thing between me and a state championship was sixty-five yards.

I ran with the ball clenched in my right arm, pushing through my opponents. My bruised body was ready to surrender, but I could make it. Only fifty-five yards.

I sprinted past two red jerseys. I was almost tackled, but John saved me and pulled 19 to the ground. I couldn’t breathe. My legs were jell-o. I couldn’t stop, though. Forty yards. I saw the end zone with the word “Wildcats” in blue letters. My cleats slipped in the grass and my eyes burned as sweat dripped into them.

I ran over the thirty-yard line—I felt the victory building up. The crowd chanted my name.

“Jay-son. Jay-son.”
Fifteen yards. I glanced behind and saw 21. His teeth were clenched and his eyes raged with fury. I stumbled, only yards from the goal line and someone grabbed my foot. I face-planted into the wet grass and the ball fumbled from my arm. 21 recovered it.

I lay there, only an arms length away from the word “Wildcats.”

Picture This: Writing Made Easier

A good way to get your students to write effectively with detailed characters and events is to write a story by looking at pictures. This is an activity that I originally came up with my pre-school students at the day care center where I work, but the technique can be modified so high school students can enjoy it too.

When I am teaching my pre-schoolers, I have each of them draw a picture of anything they would like. Once they are finished, we hang them up on the wall (in no specific order) and come up with a funny story by looking at the pictures in the order we put them up. Sometimes we’ll even switch the order of the pictures to come up with different stories. It is amazing how creative students can be using the same pictures over and over. We can do this activity for hours!

With high school students, a similar project can be done to boost their creative minds. Have your students bring in a few magazines and cut out pictures of whatever they want. Then, have them glue them to a poster board to make a collage, and write a story by looking at the pictures they cut out. It’ll be a fun activity for them because they’re not just being forced to write a story—they get to have fun with scissors and glue—something even adolescents enjoy! They’re also going to enjoy it because
their story is right in front of them, and they get to write about what they see. If they cut out a picture of a chicken, and a picture of a palm tree, they will be forced to be creative and it is fun to see what everyone comes up with!

Here is an example of a paragraph I wrote about the pictures I cut out of a piggy bank, a red car, a black dress, hand bag, and shoes, and a birthday cake:

*It was my twenty-first birthday, and I was ready to go out and celebrate! I needed the perfect outfit for a perfect night. I emptied my piggy bank and counted the $85 I had saved up. Just enough to go out and buy the black dress I saw in the window. I gathered my money and jumped into my car, then headed down to the mall. I found the perfect dress, and bought matching shoes and a hand bag to go with it. I was going to look perfect for my party!*  

**Being Random is the Best Way to be Creative**

Sometimes it is hard to think of sentences with high creative energy. As a writer, we know to state the subject, the verb, and sometimes throw in a few adjectives. A great way to get your students to make creative sentences is to give them words to work with. For example, come up with a list of random words that have nothing to do with each other. Have your students create sentences using the words you’ve given them. Because they will have to be imaginative, they will come up with all kinds of original sentences, and get a feel of how to write them on their own.

Here are a few examples of random words I threw together, then made up funny sentences with:
**Cell Phone, Iced Tea, Tree, Football, Giraffe, Feather**

Katie tapped her purple feather pen on her giraffe-print notebook as she chatted on her cell phone and sipped iced tea while she watched the boys play football.

**Cherry, Uncle, Post Office, Fringe, Black, Ladybug**

John’s cherry colored cheeks were cold from the snow, so he wrapped a black fringed scarf with lady bugs on it around his face to warm himself up before walking to the post office to mail a letter to his Uncle Fred.

**Merry-go-round, Poodle, Spiky, Overalls, Balloon**

Sam’s spiky-haired friend gave him four balloons that were shaped like poodles after they rode on the merry-go-round with the little girl who was wearing overalls.

**How Well do You Know YOU**

If students were asked to describe themselves, they would all probably say the same thing. I’m short/tall, have dark hair/light hair, the obvious. If that is the way that students describe themselves, then that is the way they are going to describe characters in their stories. To get your students to take a deeper look and think of new ways to describe a person, have them bring in a pocket size mirror to class. Have them stare at themselves in it, and as they look, have them come up with a descriptive word about themselves for each of these categories: an observation, an opinion, a description, an emotion, a memory, a comparison, and a question. They can even use these exact details in their stories!
Here is an example of what I saw when I looked in the mirror:

*Observation:* My eyes are more green than brown today

*Opinion:* My hair is too short

*Description:* I have dark, wavy hair

*Emotion:* I look tired

*Memory:* I got my 3rd holes in my ears when I was 18

*Comparison:* My face is tanner now than it was two months ago

*Question:* Why is my skin dry?

“Ten-Dollar” Words

Sometimes I have trouble finding that right word to use when I’m writing a paper. It’s easy to use words like “really” or “good,” but those words are always over-used when it comes to writing.

When I was in elementary school, my teachers always said to make sure we use “ten dollar words”—or in other words, “big” words when we write a paper. Doing so will make writing more effective, rather than using the word “very” fifteen times.

Have your students come up with words they commonly use and write them on the board. Ask them to think of as many synonyms for each word as they can and write them down. Then have them get into groups and see if they came up with different words than their classmates. To advance the exercise, have them do the same thing, but come up with as many antonyms for the same words.
Here are a few examples of some over-used words. In Red, I highlighted the synonyms for the word. In blue, I highlighted the antonyms:

**Fun:** entertaining, exciting, thrilling, amusing, enjoyable, pleasurable, delightful  
       **Tedious, dull, unexciting**

**Tall:** high, large, big, elevated, giant  
       **Short, little, tiny, petite, diminutive**

**Brief:** short, quick, fast, rapid, concise, to the point  
       **Lengthy, drawn out, long, extended**

**Quiet:** calm, silent, hushed, peaceful, soft, tranquil, subtle  
       **Loud, noisy, piercing, rowdy**

**Hot:** warm, boiling, sweltering, sizzling, blazing, blistering, scorching  
       **Cold, freezing, chilly, icy**
Know Yourself!

At some point in school, students will be asked to write an autobiography. Writing autobiographies are pretty self explanatory, and there is no right or wrong information because everything is about you! Deciding what to write about yourself is the tricky part! You know so much information about yourself, so it is hard to figure out where to even begin.

If your students are writing autobiographies, have them get started by writing down the number zero, to whatever age they currently are. Under each age, have them write any facts they know about themselves from that year, or any major events they were involved with during that year. Doing so will allow them to see all the things that happened in their lives chronologically, and then they can choose which ones are important enough to write about.

Here is an example of my chronological age line and things that happened during my lifetime:

0: I was born on March 8, 1986 at Griffin Hospital in Derby, CT. I was 8 lbs. and 9 oz. I lived in Seymour CT, and had a three-year-old sister, Stefanie.

1: I got my first pet—a bunny named Benny.

2: I went on my first family vacation to Lake George. I had surgery—tubes put in my ears.

3: Started to have an obsession with The Wizard of Oz.
4: I started pre-school at Country Bear.

5: My baby sister Haley was born. I started T-ball, soccer, and dance class.

6: I started girl scouts.

7: I insisted on wearing a dress to school every day.

8: I performed in my first school “lip sync show.”

9: I started taking pitching lessons.

10: I played in the “major league” in little league.

11: I was a little league state champion. Lauren passed away—the baby girl my mom babysat every day.

12: I started middle school.

13: I had my first “boyfriend.”

14: I started high school.

15: I got to pick out my class ring

16: I got my license.

17: I went to my junior prom. I started dating my first serious boyfriend. I moved into a new house, still in the same town.

18: I went to my senior semi-formal. My high school softball team won the state championship. I graduated high school and went to college at Western Connecticut.

19: My grandpa passed away.

20: I got to room in college with my best friend.

21: I officially became legal.
Describe Yourself!

It’s hard to think of words to describe yourself. When I think about describing myself, I think of brown hair, hazel, eyes, and I’m short. But there is a lot more to me than that! But, you’d be amazed at how many adjectives you can come up with about yourself when given a specific letter to work with!

Have your students write the alphabet vertically down the page (just like they did with their age in the exercise above), then come up with a descriptive word about themselves for each letter. They will come up with so many illustrative adjectives about themselves—adjectives they may have never thought of otherwise—and will be able to describe themselves much easier when it comes time to start writing.

Here is an example of my own alphabet acronym:

\[
\begin{align*}
A & \text{thletic} & J & \text{justifiable} & S & \text{hort} \\
B & \text{ rave} & K & \text{ind} & T & \text{ough} \\
C & \text{lumsy} & L & \text{oyal} & U & \text{nderstandable} \\
D & \text{etermined} & M & \text{odest} & V & \text{eracious} \\
E & \text{nergetic} & N & \text{aive} & W & \text{hite} \\
F & \text{air} & O & \text{utgoing} & X & \text{enodochial} \\
G & \text{ullible} & P & \text{icky} & Y & \text{oung} \\
H & \text{elpful} & Q & \text{uiet} & Z & \text{aelous} \\
I & \text{ndependant} & R & \text{eliable} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Take a Trip Down Memory Lane
The best way to tell your “life” to someone else is to show them pictures of it. Sometimes when I find old pictures, I reminisce about old times, and memories from that day start flowing back to me. I remember everything, from what I wore, to whom I was with, what we did, what we ate, and so on.

Have your students bring in pictures to help them write their autobiographies. Having the pictures will not only help them remember what they did, but will help them remember how they felt! Pictures bring so much more life to an autobiography, for both the writer and reader.

Here is an example of an excerpt that would be found in my own autobiography to go along with this picture of me and my sisters:

My sisters are my best friends in the entire world. Although we are all three to four years apart, we are extremely close and often forget that there is such an age difference between us! They are such an important part of my life—Stefanie is twenty-five and Haley is sixteen. Two summers ago we took our first vacation together—just the three of us—to California to see our grandma, grandpa, aunts, uncles, and cousins. It was my first time on the west coast, and I was happy I was able to spend it with them.
The High School Times

Every student has different interests, whether it’s reading, writing, sports, gossip, word puzzles, movies, music, etc. And of course, it is always easier to write about the things you enjoy.

A great way to have your students write enthusiastically is to have them create a school (or classroom) newspaper. It will allow them to write about things they enjoy, so they will have fun while they are doing it. If one student enjoys movies, have him/her write a review of what’s new and playing. If another student enjoys talking about the latest events, have them write about the school pep rally, or homecoming volleyball tournament. Most students will have to do their writing or research on their newspaper topic outside of the classroom, but will forget they’re doing “homework” because they’ll be interested in what they are writing about.

I am big into music, so here is a sample of what I would contribute to the newspaper:

For all you rock fans, gray skies have turned blue. You were devastated that day when you turned on radio 104 four years ago and it was no longer. It became power 104.1 and played hip-hop and R&B. Well, good news. Radio 104 is back as 104one playing all of your favorite rock bands, including Green Day, Sublime, and Red Hot Chile Peppers. You can check out their website at http://www.1041music.com/pages/construction.html to find out more about the
station. The coolest feature—every day you can see what song was playing at what time. If you’re listening in the car and hear a song you like, remember what time it is and find out who the artist is online later! So far they have already played a lot of oldies but goodies, but also a lot of new stuff that you should check out! So get ready to rock with 104one!

**To whom it may Concern**

One of the best ways to support an argument that you may have is to write a letter to a person of higher status stating your claim. Because the letter is going to an important person, students will try to sound professional, not sloppy in their writing, so the higher authority will take them seriously.

Have your students write either a complaint letter, persuasive letter, or letter of commendation to a high social figure about any issue they have. Doing so will give them practice in writing professionally and supporting a true feeling or argument they have in real life. They will be able to express themselves freely, and practice writing at the same time.

Here is an example of a complaint letter that I would write to Westconn regarding the current shuttle and parking situation.

*In orange, I highlighted the points that strongly backed up my argument on Westside resident parking.*

*To whom it may Concern,*

*I would like to say that I find it extremely inconvenient that Westside residents are not allowed to park their cars on the Midtown campus. I understand that there is*
limited parking space which causes the issue, but it is not fair that commuters can park on Midtown when some of them live closer than the Westside residents.

I have a friend who works the gate of the Midtown resident parking garage, and he says that the garage is pretty empty every day. If there are so many extra parking spaces that nobody uses, why can’t Westside residents park in the garage?

It is not like the shuttles are always on time, and come every fifteen minutes like they are supposed to. As a member of the women’s softball team, I often have to report from practice right from class. There have been many occasions when I have been late for practice due to the shuttle being late—something I can not control, but would be able to control if I could park on campus. Had it been a game day, I would have been late because the driver decided to run to the café to grab a bite to eat rather than leave campus on time.

It would be very beneficial if you could be a little more accommodating for the Westside residents and their parking situation. Students shouldn’t be late for class because the shuttle is “full” and drives right past the dorm in the morning. Students should be able to drive back and forth between campuses at ease, and shouldn’t have to worry about getting tickets in empty parking lots when there are many empty spaces. I hope you will take my thoughts into consideration and find ways to help the Westside campus residents.
Part 7

A Small Intro to Poetry

Let Your Mind Go

In high school, I took an art class and one of the exercises we had to do was listen to any type of instrumental music, and let our hands just draw as we listened. We had to draw what we felt, allowing the music to inspire us.

Another great way to use this tool is in a poetry class or lesson. I started doing this when I came to college and began writing poetry. The instrumental music is soothing, and helps me write more fluidly. This exercise will definitely get your students to go in an entire different direction with their poetry, and will loosen up their mind when they are unsure of where to start!

Here is a Haiku I wrote while listening to the instrumental version of “The Start of Something New” from the High School Musical soundtrack. The five-seven-five syllable count fit right in with the beat of the song, which helped the flow of my writing.

Snow falls from the sky.
Empty trees are covered in white.
It is beautiful.

Sing it Again

There is more than one way that music can influence our writing. Writing to instrumental music works, but sometimes listening to lyrics can work as well. My
favorite band, Brand New, has some of the strongest lyrics in music today, and I find them inspiring. I quite often find myself lying in my bed listening to my ipod, paying close attention to the lyrics of the songs. When I need an idea to start writing a poem, I pull up the lyrics online, and read them over to get another feel of what the artists are offering through their music.

In class, have your students bring in song lyrics from one of their favorite bands. Having a great song to inspire their writing will give their poems more powerful feeling.

Here is a rhyme poem I wrote, inspired by the song “The Boy Who Blocked his own Shot” by Brand New. Underneath my poem are the lyrics to the song, and highlighted in green are the lyrics that were the most inspiring to me.

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ want you to be happy once more,} \\
& \text{Like you used to be—that boy I adored.} \\
I & \text{ made a mistake; I know it is true,} \\
& \text{If you choose to forgive, it is all up to you.} \\
I & \text{ will leave you alone, if that’s what you want,} \\
& \text{But my presence will always be there to haunt.} \\
& \text{You say you want to fix this miss,} \\
& \text{But want my sympathy, more or less.} \\
& \text{Forever you’ll be that thorn in my side,} \\
& \text{Accompanying me and my heart that’s denied.}
\end{align*}
\]

"The Boy Who Blocked His Own Shot"
If it makes you less sad, I will die by your hand. I hope you find out what you want. I already know what I am. And if it makes you less sad, we'll start talking again. And you can tell me how vile I already know that I am. I'll grow old and start acting my age. I'll be a brand new day in a life that you hate. A crown of gold. A heart that's harder than stone. And it hurts a whole lot, but it's missed when it's gone. Call me a safe bet. I'm betting I'm not. I'm glad that you can forgive. I'm only hoping as time goes, you can forget. If it makes you less sad, I'll move out of the state. You can keep to yourself. I'll keep out of your way. And if it makes you less sad, I'll take your pictures all down. Every picture you paint, I will paint myself out. It's cold as a tomb, and it's dark in your room, when I sneak to your bed to pour salt in your wounds. So call it quits or get a grip. Say you wanted a solution. You just wanted to be missed. Call me a safe bet. I'm betting I'm not. I'm glad that you can forgive. I'm only hoping as time goes, you can forget... You are calm and reposed. Let your beauty unfold. Pale white, like the skin stretched over your bones. Spring keeps you ever close. You are second hand smoke. You are so fragile and thin. Standing trial for your sins. Holding onto yourself the best you can. You are the smell before rain. You are the blood in my veins. Call me a safe bet. I'm betting I'm not. I'm glad that you can forgive. I'm only hoping as time goes, you can forget.

**Be an Open-Minded Poet**

When writing poetry, it is important to observe the world around you. I like to sit on a bench around campus and write about what is happening around me. It makes my writing more natural.

Have your students write about anything they desire. It may be love, the sun, or the cat down the street. As long as they are enjoying what they’re writing and find that it is releasing their inner feelings, they are on the right track.
Here is an example of a limerick I wrote while I was sitting outside of the student center, watching a guy tie his shoe. He had to re-tie it about three times, and his friend thought it was funny. Since limericks are meant to be funny, I thought it would be appropriate to write one for this situation.

*There once was a boy named Lou,*

*Who couldn’t tie his own shoe.*

*His friend laughed in his face,*

*Called him a disgrace,*

*And then he felt oh-so-blue.*
Epilogue

As I created this guide to teaching writing, I discovered how many options I have. A teacher has to be creative with the way she presents material so her students will continue to be interested in what she has to offer.

I enjoyed making this guide because it is something I will be able to use throughout my career, and will to add to as I discover more about writing. A guide like this can never have too many ideas. I hope that other teachers find it as beneficial as I have and are willing to try some of the activities for their own classrooms. Sharing teaching strategies is a great way to discover new ideas and bring more life to your classroom throughout your years as an educator.

There are two things in life that I love for—children, and writing. I am looking forward to working with both of them throughout my career, and this guide is going to assist me. Writing doesn’t have to be the dreaded thought that it often is in a high school student’s mind; it can be the enjoyable part of the school day—as long as teachers are willing to be committed to their students and devote their time to making writing a pleasure.
Bibliography

