

Minnesota Writing Project

--- Demonstration Lesson Template ---

Title of lesson: Screaming Trees!

Suggested grade/age: High School, yet adaptable to any grade.

Approximate time needed to complete lesson: One hour (more if using lesson extension).

Learning objective(s) and significance of lesson:

Researchers on writing instruction (Elbow, Murray, Anderson) address the need for a writer's control of word choice and detail. For many student writers, instinct reigns supreme. Students balk at the effort required to compose precise words and arresting detail.

This lesson uses surprise and novelty to coax students into thinking about a familiar subject in a new way. By doing so, students consider word choice and detail more deliberately.

An added benefit is how the lesson prods students into simile, metaphor and personification. The lesson allows for reflection about how these devices can influence and enhance description or alternatively, obscure it.

Brief summary/outline of lesson:

I employed this lesson in the middle of the semester in my Creative Writing class to teach about the power of description. It could be easily adjusted to introduce a unit related to poetry or figurative language. This lesson makes the most sense if students are already in the groove of schoolwork—writing, reading, and collaborating as a class.

Steps:

1. In their writing notebook, individual students list words they associate with trees. They should have at least 15 ideas. 3-5 minutes.
2. Students meet in groups of 3 to share their “tree words” and nominate 3 for a class list. Students should be ready to change their words on the spot if needed. 3-5 minutes.
3. The teacher (or a student) collects the class list of “tree words” on a white board, smart board or other display surface. Each group from #3 must contribute new words. 3-5 minutes.
4. To start the students thinking about language, the teacher leads a discussion about the words. The teacher could do this on the spot asking “What do you notice about this list? Where did we acquire these words? What do these words reveal about trees?” to spur large group discussion. Or, the teacher may find it appropriate to have a brief written reflection and/or small group share prior to this discussion. 3-5 minutes.
5. The teacher then sets the parameters for the descriptive writing activity: students view each tree image for 3 minutes, spending as much time writing as possible. The students **may not use words from the list generated in step 3.** 2 minutes.
5. Students write, describing each image without using words from list.

Once they discover they must be figurative and apply unusual words, students find this easier than it sounds at first. 10-15 minutes.

6. Students take a couple minutes to read over what they've written, highlighting a few phrases, sentences or a paragraph they like. At this point, students may use words from the list if they feel they would enhance their writing in some way.
7. Students exchange their writing with another student. Students comment on each other's writing, either verbally or in a written response. The teacher may want to set parameters for these responses, making a minimum requirement of two specific sentences, for example. 5-7 minutes.
7. Students look again at their writing and write a sentence or two about how they used words during the activity, as well as a prediction about what kind of piece is growing from their initial description. Examples: "I used body words for the tree, which really brought out some angry tone" and "This seems like it's becoming a story about a lost boy." 3 minutes.
8. Teacher leads a whole class discussion about what class noticed about word choice and detail during lesson. Sample questions: "What did you think about your list of 15 tree words when you started? What do you think of it now? Did your writing influence this in some way?" or "How did your peers use words in their descriptions? How did you? Anything these pieces had in common? Anything strikingly different?" Teacher can record these responses on exit slip and/or poster. 5 minutes.

Related Resources:

Materials:

Pen
Writer's notebook
LCD projector
Powerpoint of 4 tree photographs (or other 3-4 images of a similar subject)
Example: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/12/magazine/how-to-see-a-tree.html>

Model texts:

"Mushrooms" by Sylvia Plath
Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard

Sources for writing instruction:

Ten Things Every Writer Needs to Know by Jeff Anderson
Writing With Power by Peter Elbow
Write Like This by Kelly Gallagher
A Writer Teaches Writing by Donald Murray

Possible extensions or adaptations for different purposes/student needs:

Extension:

Have students review their writing from the previous day. How does it strike them now? Students begin to revise writing, perhaps with parameters set by teacher, such as "Add something, replace something, delete something, reorder something" (the R.A.D.a.R. strategy). Students

exchange writing with a new reader or peer group and get more feedback on where the writing is headed. Students create outline for writing and create a draft of a longer piece stemming from this work.

Adaptations:

Limiting vocabulary, especially after presenting the rich list from step #3, may paralyze some students, causing them to focus on their weaknesses in a way that inhibits learning and creativity. This lesson can still work for students of varied levels and needs (ELL, IEP). For these students, a change in the class rules for the activity can work. In this case, an expectation such as “3 words you must use and 3 words you choose to use” creates equity.

Describing a subject while refraining from its jargon is an effective way to demonstrate learning on a variety of topics. Examples: The American Constitution described without government-type words, the quadratic equation without math words. Presenting ideas in this way deepens understanding. Teachers could assign students writing of this nature as a formative or summative assessment in any subject area.

Teachers with access to actual trees may take students on an observation walk. Younger students may benefit from touching and smelling branches, leaves, pine cones.

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