

A Pittsburgh Memory

A Memoir Study Focusing on Location

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Introduction

This unit was developed from the standpoint of a self-contained classroom where the same teacher would deliver the English, Reading and Social Studies instruction. The reading selections, activities and lessons are designed for fourth and fifth grade students, but can be adjusted to meet a variety of reading levels. There is no suggested timeline. This unit can be carried out in its entirety or dispersed throughout the year. It can be integrated with any literature program that is supported by student writing.

A unique aspect of children's memoir writing is that their collection of memories, wisdom and value is limited. That is not to say these memories do not exist. Children should be given the opportunity to develop an understanding of who they are and where they come from, and how this is connected to the past & future, the near & far away. A memoir study focusing on location as a theme can provide this opportunity.

The reason I chose memoir writing is because it deals with two difficult issues facing all writers (1) what **to** include and (2) what **not to** include. The author, Maya Angelou, once said, "This is a good 20 page paper, if I had had more time it would have been an excellent 10 page paper." In her book, How I Became a Writer, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor shares her view on the evolution of her work, "I've learned to let a manuscript sit for a few days or weeks, then read it again. Looking for places it might be improved." (Naylor, p. 88). The Writer's Notebook is a perfect place for students to collect their writing so that they may linger over pieces and return to the work when they are inspired.

This unit is comprised of three major components; Activities that stimulate the recording of memories, Activities that help students "craft" their work, and a Focus on Pittsburgh.

Reading and writing should occur in conjunction with one another. If students are expected to produce quality writing they must be exposed to quality literature. Throughout the unit the teacher suggests stories and passages (primarily memoir) that will stimulate and motivate young writers. These include level texts for the students to read independently or above level where the teacher would recite or distill effective passages to review with the group.

Activities that stimulate the recording of memories:

Students won't think of themselves as writers if they do not have continual opportunities to record their thoughts, questions, ideas etc. Students must each have a writer's notebook that they can easily access. Students should be able to take the notebook home and be encouraged to use it on a regular basis. The notebook will become a "scrapbook", a photo album for "word pictures". This notebook will be a valuable resource for students as they write longer, more developed pieces. The notebook is a place to collect memories. According to writing instructor and author, Lucy Calkins, the instinct for memoir is there whenever we return to a remembered place, catch a whiff of a familiar smell or feel nostalgic over a photograph. The seeds of

memoir are there when we listen to stories and say, "That reminds me when...". The writer's notebook is the place to store those "seeds". (2000, pp. 5) The writer's notebook should become part of a student's writing portfolio.

Journal Activities

(Teacher's note) All writing should be done in the writer's notebook. This will allow the student to select which pieces they will work on in the "crafting" or revising portion of the unit. Student shouldn't have to pigeon hole a piece of writing before they have even begun. The writer's notebook allows for a more natural progression of a student's writing and revising. Some revisions could be recorded directly in the writer's notebook, while other pieces that will be developed more fully could be stored on disk or recited on tape.

There is no limit to the number of writing prompts that facilitate reflection and recording of memories. They can range from specific, "How does your family/community celebrate Independence Day" to general, "Record some highlights of your summer vacation". In the story Friday Night is PaPa Night by Ruth A. Sonneborn, the children and their mother anxiously await PaPa's return for their Friday night routine.

Activity

The teacher reads the book aloud and asks students to record a special routine or time that they share with one certain person. Perhaps they spend the weekend with a grandparent or they have an aunt or uncle who takes them shopping for new school clothes each year. The important thing is that students realize everyone has stories and even simple events can be told in an engaging manner.

In the beginning of An American Childhood, Annie Dillard describes the "frightening monster" that moved across the walls of her bedroom during the night (Dillard, pg. 21). Later on she realizes that the apparition was merely car lights reflecting in the dark room.

Journal Topic/Question - Is there something that you remember not understanding as a young child that you understand now?

You could assist students by sharing an anecdote of your own. As the instructor you can model the sharing of stories and be the force that keeps the interest high.

In Everett Anderson's Nine Months, Lucille Clifton tells the story of a mother's pregnancy through the eyes of her young son, Everett, who waits for the arrival of his new sibling.

Activity

Have students choose an event that was very significant for someone they are close to (mother or sister's pregnancy, an older sibling leaving home) and retell the event from their point of view; how did they feel, what were their concerns, how did the event effect them. The students could share their pieces orally with the group. This demonstrates that people see things differently and opinions and feelings are very individual.

Another activity that encourages this skill is to have each student write about an event that everyone in the class experienced (such as a class trip or a celebration). Again, have the students share their pieces orally with the group.

This gives students the opportunity to see that people have their own way of seeing things and that they can put their individual "style" into the writing to set it apart.

Personal Time Lines

Students create a timeline of the events in their lives. Before the students begin to work individually, the group could generate a list of the types of events that would be significant enough to include in the timeline. The time line should be maintained in the student's portfolio. This way it becomes a tool to assist in the generation of ideas and gives students a time reference of their own. After the timeline is developed the student can extract one section at a time and focus his/her writing on that one event or period in time.

Show and Tell

Students will bring in an item to school that has personal significance (stuffed animals, seashell collections, a pen pal letter, a keepsake box, favorite clothes, pictures). The student will be able to write about the item as well as present it to the group and explain why it is important to them. They can talk about where they got it (from a favorite aunt), where they keep it (a shelf in their bedroom) or what memories it generates for them (vacations at the cabin by the lake).

(Teacher's Note) For the next two activities, I used to be Memories and Secrets About me Similes, it is very helpful if the class generates a word bank of personal characteristics and character traits. This word bank should be posted in the Writing Center and accessible for student reference.

I used to be Memories

Cynthia Rylant's When I was Young in the Mountains is a good book to use with this activity, because it models reflection.

This activity helps students reflect on their past. They follow the format

I used to be _____ but now I _____

The students can generate ideas by asking family members to tell them stories about them as little children, by looking at picture albums and observing young children that they know.

Secrets About me Similes

You can build excitement and foster ideas for this activity by reading the poem By Myself by Eloise Greenfield. In this poem the author compares herself to everything from a gospel song to a loaf of brown bread.

Again students are encouraged to look into themselves and make comparisons to the world around them. They use the format

I am as _____ as a/an _____. This lesson also focuses on using adjectives for imagery.

Activities that help students craft their work:

In How I Came To Be A Writer Phyllis Reynolds Naylor addresses the issue of writing with style. "It was not so much what I wrote about, I discovered, as how I wrote about it. After all, almost anything that could ever happen to a human being had already been written about, by someone, somewhere. The difference would be in the treatment, the style."(Naylor, p.49). There are many literary elements that authors use to make their work

more engaging and to create a sense of style. I will address some of these elements - the use of repetition, onomatopoeia, conflict, structure (framing), setting, and imagery.

Family Stories

Cynthia Rylant's When I was Young in the Mountains and Faith Ringgold's Tar Beach are examples of simple family stories made interesting by adding style such as repetition and focusing on images and relationships. Students can solicit familiar family stories that would be suitable to tell in school. The student should write the story and present it orally. They then receive feedback from the class as to which parts were most effective. This helps the writer "see" how readers receive their message. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor writes, "I've also discovered the value of reading my work aloud to a small group of friends for their comments. Even reading aloud to myself helps me pick up rough places in the rhythm and wording that I hadn't noticed before." (Naylor, p. 88).

Writing about personal snapshots

This activity has a dual purpose. (1) It helps generate memories for the student and allows them to see that sometimes what seems ordinary can become extraordinary. (2) It helps the student focus his/her lens and avoid "summary writing". When a writer tries to capture too much he often sacrifices quality for quantity. Have students bring in a personal snapshot or have pictures cut out of magazines. The student studies the photo and records what is going on in the picture. When the student thinks he has explored every aspect of the snapshot encourage him to imagine what the people were feeling, or what they might be saying. They can also describe the scene from a different vantagepoint, adding realizations they didn't have at the time the photo was taken. It doesn't have to be an exact retelling, but their interpretation. In Byrd Baylor's The Best Town in the World she describes a field of wildflowers as being all shades of lavender and purple and orange and red and blue and the palest kind of pink. They all had butterflies to match. James Stephenson in the book When I was Nine, describes his favorite lookout spot in such detail you feel as though you are standing beside him at the window.

Standing in – looking out

As important as it is for students to look inward, it is also important to recognize events that are occurring around the main scene. This activity calls for large pieces of drawing paper. Students record their scenes, very small, in the middle of the paper. Each student should be given the same basic scene (a student doing homework or a mother giving her baby a bath). Then around that picture they would draw the things going on around the scene. They may draw their home or their Dad's car driving up the street, or the mountains surrounding their house. The idea is to include the places and events that surround their scene. Students can share their setting with the group. This gives them a chance to see the effect that setting has on a piece and that a change in setting can very much change the feeling of the writing. It is also important to note that not everything must be recorded, but that some details like weather and time of day can drastically effect the feeling of the work.

Repetition

This is a simple and effective way to show evidence of writer's craft. In Cynthia Rylant's When I was Young in the Mountains, repeats the phrase "when I was young" throughout the story. Anna Eagan Smucker's No Star Nights also uses the technique of repetition as the author remembers "everyday when we were little". Students can model this by creating a repetition of their own or looking for evidence of repetition that occurs naturally in one of their journal entries.

Structure

The primary aspect of structure I will address is called framing. Cynthia Rylant's When the Relatives Came frames the visit with the trip the relatives take to and from her house. The story is (16) pages. Eight of those pages are spent describing the trip, as many pages as describe the actual visit. The author also uses the growing season (grapes) as a way to frame the visit. In On Grandma's Roof, by Erica Silverman, the story is framed by the young girl and her grandmother climbing the stairs to the roof where they hang laundry and have a picnic. And then climbing back down when the day, the laundry and the picnic are done. Have the class create a frame for a story that doesn't have one. For independent practice, students could work with a piece of writing provided by the teacher or use pieces from their journals.

Imagery

In developing a sense of effective imagery students must be exposed to powerful examples. It is also helpful to have a place in the room for students to record images they come across in their reading. These can be reviewed during mini-lessons. In Anna Egan Smucker's No Star Nights she talks of "golden spark-spitting steel" and "fiery hot molten slag that in the night glowed orange". In Apt. 3, Ezra Jack Keats talks of "juicy snoring". When students are just beginning to work with imagery the use of metaphor and simile can be very helpful.

Conflict

In order to keep readers engaged an author would create a conflict that requires resolution. The reader then becomes involved in the story because they want to know the resolution. Conflict can be used as a plot or as a subplot. In Smoky Night, Eve Bunting writes of the obvious conflict occurring during a riot. But she also includes the subplot of a boy and his neighbor's warring cats that have both turned up missing.

Onomatopoeia

Writers often have fun with words. In The Empty Lot by Dale Fife uses imitative words to mimic the sounds made by the chickadee's complaints "dee-dee-dee" and the woodpecker's scolds "wick up - wick up". In the book Duke Ellington by Andrea Davis Pinkey, the use of onomatopoeia reinforces the jazz great's sound. She writes, "He was a smooth-talkin', slick-steppin', piano playing kid." And "Folks called the music ragtime-piano that turned umpy-dump into a soul-rousing romp." The class could generate a list of sound words to be used in their writing. Some suggestions include, bang, boom, crackle, fizz, slurp and thud.

Focus on Pittsburgh

This section of the unit will address how writers handle descriptions of landscape as well as more familiar, intimate locations. Students will have the opportunity to use local points of interest and proper nouns to give their work a sense of region. As they study the writing of Anna Egan Smucker, Laurie Graham and Annie Dillard, they will recognize common themes and images that the authors use to characterize the area of Pittsburgh. The focus on location serves to increase the powers of observation, heighten an awareness of surroundings and investigate how authors handle setting

"Some memoirs center around memories of a place, as in Anna Egan Smucker's No Star Nights, a portrait of a steel mill town." (Calkins, p. 16).

To introduce the theme of location and writing about an environment the teacher conducts a *Book Talk* of No Star Nights. The teacher should read the book aloud to the class. There are a variety of techniques that the author uses in the story. Elements for discussion include: the use of words to create powerful images for the reader, how the author describes the steel mills, her school, parades and a family trip to the Pirates game and the structure of the story itself. For the imagery lesson students could identify phrases that make an impact on them such as "grumpy times" or "the black silhouettes of Pittsburgh's steel mills" and record these in their writer's notebook. Students could use a Venn Diagram or other graphic organizer to compare and contrast their childhood in Pittsburgh with the author's childhood.

These notes could be written out as a personal essay. "The structure of the story is that it begins with the same accumulation of images, most of them having the quality of 'every day, when we were little' In No Star Nights, as in many memoirs, after an accumulation of images about everyday life, the rhythm shifts to a slower pace, and the book ends with a long detailed story of one day." (Calkins, p. 17) The element of structure is somewhat sophisticated and is best facilitated by the instructor as she or he reads aloud to the class. Students should be continually prompted to note the structures that authors use to organize the work.

Writing about the Landscape

Fort Pitt Elementary School sits atop the second highest point in Pittsburgh. From this loft we have views of the city that rival Mt. Washington. A unique aspect of the Pittsburgh landscape is its combination of industry with nature. In order to write most effectively, students need the opportunity to "see" the land. Trips to Mt. Washington or the West End Overlook are recommended. From these points students can observe the way nature and man made structures fuse to create an urban landscape. While the students are making their observations either on field trips or while looking at picture books or videos of the region the instructor could read selected passages from An American Childhood and Singing the City: The Bonds of Home in an Industrial Landscape. In An American Childhood Annie Dillard talks about "the forested mountains and hills, the way the three rivers lie flat and moving among them, the way the low land lies wooded among them, and the way the blunt mountains rise in the darkness from the river's banks." (Zinsser, p. 147) Graham describes her views "On one sunny afternoon I found myself on Mt. Washington, the hill that rises abruptly across the river from downtown. I looked out over the city in the hazy sunlight. The air was nearly still, and I felt suspended above the rivers and the buildings below. I remember looking past the coal barges across from the Point and down the Ohio. The stack and storage tanks of Neville Island just visible in the distance." (Graham, p. 10). Students should record their landscape descriptions in the writer's notebook.

Writing About more familiar, intimate locations

In this section of the unit students are prompted to narrow their lens to observe the more minute and easily overlooked aspects of the environment. Details that are not obvious to the casual viewer are celebrated here. In An American Childhood Annie Dillard decries the alley next to her house as only someone who looked at it daily could. "The alley ended at an empty, padlocked garage. In summer a few hairs of grass grew down the alley's center. Down the alley's side, broken glass, old nails, and pellets of foil and candy wrappers spiked the greasy black soil out of which a dirty catalpa and a dirty sycamore grew." (Dillard, p. 39). In The Spencers of Amberson Avenue Ethel Spencer remembers a particular street renovation "The sewer pipes appeared to have been piled up at the sides solely for our benefit. We climbed over them, walked along their tops, raced along the big curbstones, wallowed in the mud-in fact, enjoyed to the utmost every step of street making." (Spencer, p. 6).

Send the students off with their writer's notebook to discover and record the intimate details that give their neighborhood character.

Writing with Symbols

Symbols are powerful images. In this activity the teacher would present a variety of regional symbols (Heinz ketchup, Isaly's chipped ham, a Steeler's pennant etc). These symbols are basic and often taken for granted. We fail to realize the significance of these everyday items and how they can enhance the regional flair of a piece of writing. Conduct a class revision activity where common nouns are replaced with proper nouns. Students can see how specific nouns create strong images for the reader. A list of picture books is given in the bibliography. Also helpful are calendars and videos produced by local Chambers of Commerce.

In closing, I would like to add that this unit is extremely flexible, because all of the literature and writing activities support good writing instruction and produce products that would be an asset to any writing portfolio. The literature, supported mini-lessons can be administered independently to support any thematic unit.

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Standards Appendix

This standards appendix is designed to demonstrate how this unit supports standards. The Pittsburgh Public Schools has 62 Content Standards in 10 areas of study. This appendix identifies the standards that are directly addressed in this unit.

Communication

Standard #2 All students read and use a variety of strategies to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.

As students study the writing of professional authors they will come to recognize the different literary elements that give a piece of work its style. They will also have to develop strategies for understanding images and

messages not explicitly stated in the text. They will also be responsible for making critical judgements about the quality of their work and the work of other students.

Standard #3 All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.

Activities that support this standard include author's chair where students present their work orally to a group and receive oral feedback from the group and peer revision where students get together in small groups and look closely at the writing. These activities are beneficial for the student presenting the work as well as for the students who must actively listen and use oral skills to share their comments.

Standard #4 All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform and persuade in all subject areas.

Students must write daily in order to develop fluency and structure. The daily writing journal supports this standard well. Students should be required to experiment with the different types of writing so that they become able to identify the genres on their own.