

## **Shapes of Our City:**

### **A pre-school approach to writing**

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- **Objectives**

The goal of this curriculum unit is to educate pre-school students about the importance of writing. This will be accomplished first by defining what writing is and then by offering the students a variety of ways to look at writing and the writing process. It will provide ideas for pre-school teachers to integrate the literacy component into their curriculum. The concepts of "shapes" and "our city" will be used to connect these ideas together.

In my experiences with young writers, it seems that they are always faced with the challenge of what to write about. In this curriculum unit, students will be given examples of different types of literature which will all in some way be connected to the topics "shapes" and "our city". They will also be given the opportunity to have different experiences involving "shapes" and "our city".

Young writers, as well as other writers, are most interested in writing about something that they are interested in or have prior knowledge of. The students will be given the guidance to put the information and the ideas they have learned into some form of writing or pre-writing activity. This curriculum unit promotes the idea that by providing the children with purposeful and meaningful writing opportunities in the classroom you can begin to develop their understanding of some basic literacy principles.

#### **Background**

In Webster's Dictionary writing is defined as "the mechanical act of forming characters on paper or any other material." Some of the first characters that pre-school students learn and form are shapes. Everything you see has a shape. There are shapes all around us. Shapes are also a major part of any pre-school curriculum. Using pictures of familiar objects and everyday situations in the classroom helps students to realize that shapes are an important part of everyday life.

Our city, Pittsburgh, is also something that is always around us and is an important part of our everyday lives. Many young students aren't aware of the importance of their city- its history, its significances and contributions to the world today, and its possible future accomplishments.

I chose to use these topics to assist pre-school teachers in opening their students' minds to ideas about what writing is. The students will then be ready for pre-writing activities and sharing information about the topics

they are learning through their own level of writing. As Diane Gess states, "Young children, when exposed to language and taught effectively, can write and acquire a vocabulary far beyond expected." (1)

Children go through various stages when learning how to write. Many pre-school students, armed with their crayon, marker, or even a pencil, believe that they are writers. Most students begin to tell stories with the pictures that they draw. They then move on to scribbling and forming shapes by tracing or copying them. Next they are ready to replicate letters, especially the ones in their names, and they begin to have a better understanding of what writing really is.

## **Strategies**

All aspects of this curriculum unit can be taught by using hands-on activities. This will ensure that the students get to learn the information through their own experiences. By doing this, they will gain skills and information that can be used to put into some form of writing or pre-writing activity.

The concepts of "shapes" and "our city" can be taught through experiences in the classroom, such as with responding to literature and follow-up activities, some which may be center-based. However, the most effective way that the students will gain this knowledge is to actually go to, and experience, their city on a field trip. The Head Start program provides an expense account for these types of activities. However, if you are not in a pre-school center that does this you may want to consider taking neighborhood walks and supplementing the experience with additional resources. Experience charts and trip sheets will be helpful in recording information. Copies of these can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B.

For example, our first field trip starts with a school bus ride to Mount Washington with the children singing shapes songs as they look out the rectangular windows at various sights along the way. The children, now on Grandview Avenue, with clipboards and trip sheets will be directed to draw pictures of what they see from the circular overlook. The children are reminded that they are looking for shapes in their city below.

Ahead of them is the The Point. I explain to the students that this point is where the three rivers meet. And what shape has three sides I ask? The triangle, of course. Which is why it is also called The Golden Triangle. One child calls out, "I went there to see a football game!" He is referring to the circular shaped Three Rivers Stadium where the Steelers and the Pirates sports teams play.

The children are involved in a very rich and meaningful interaction with their city. They are gaining and recording knowledge to be taken back to the classroom. This information will be used to assist in teaching the lessons and activities that make up this curriculum.

## **Lessons and Activities**

The following are examples of lessons and activities that can be used to support the ideas of this curriculum unit. Since every city differs, you will need to adapt the activities surrounding "our city" to meet your needs. However, the basic principles of shapes can be applied to all classrooms. These lessons are also developed in relationship to the national, state, and local standards that all Pittsburgh Public School curricula must meet. The state has developed 62 content standards within 10 Core Curriculum Frameworks to meet the national standards. In this unit the focus is on the Communication Standards. A set of communication standards has recently been adapted to meet the level of the pre-school student; these are the pre-kindergarten communication standards. This curriculum unit meets those standards, which can be found in Appendix C. In the following lessons and activities section of the curriculum I will refer to these standards by number.

### **Lesson 1: Shapes**

This can be used as the first lesson in the curriculum unit and can be taught before the initial field trip or discussion of "our city". This lesson addresses the pre-kindergarten communication standards 1A, 1B, 1C, 2B, and 3A. An objective of this lesson is that the students will be able to name the shapes: circle, triangle, rectangle, square, diamond, and heart. They will also be able to describe a characteristic of each shape, such as, a circle is round or a triangle has three sides.

The first step is to introduce the students to the subject and find out their prior knowledge. Ask the students what they already know about shapes and record their responses on an experience chart. The next step is to read to the class a book about shapes in a group setting. I chose *Afro-Bets: Book of Shapes* by Margery Brown. You should use strategies such as introducing the author and illustrator and making predictions about the story. Once the book is read, the children should be given an opportunity to retell the story and share the information that they have learned. This will demonstrate their listening and comprehension skills.

In order for pre-school children to write, they must first develop the fine motor skills that will enable them to do this. By conducting follow-up hands-on activities the children will be able to respond to the literature while developing their fine motor skills. Some examples of this are having the children draw or trace the six shapes from the book, using paper and crayons, shape stencils and pictures of shapes. The children can also form shapes by using various tactile materials such as pipe cleaners or play-dough.

The knowledge gained in this first lesson will then be used as the students' core knowledge of shapes throughout the curriculum unit. The preceding field trips and lessons and activities will use the students' knowledge of shapes to enable them to better understand literacy and writing concepts.

## Lesson 2: Our City

This can be used as the second lesson in the curriculum unit and can be taught after the initial lesson about shapes. It can be used as an initial discussion of "our city", either before the first field trip (which is when I will use it) or after as a follow up discussion. This lesson addresses the pre-kindergarten communication standards 1A, 1B, 1C, 2A, and 3A. Some objectives of this lesson are that the students will be able to locate "our city" on a map and describe some characteristics of "our city".

As in the previous lesson, the first step is to introduce the students to the subject and find out prior knowledge. Ask the students what they already know about "our city" and record their responses on an experience chart. As more information is collected about "our city", perhaps on a field trip, more will be added to the chart. The next step is to show the students various pictures of "our city". This can be accomplished by using maps, photographs, and a variety of books. A great book of paintings of "our city" for children to look at is *Byzantine Butterflies: The Folk Painting of Peter Contis and Helen Contis*. Several other useful pictures can be found on these web sites: [www.realpittsburgh.com](http://www.realpittsburgh.com) and [www.clpgh.org](http://www.clpgh.org).

The students can become familiar with various characteristics of their city, past and present, by being read excerpts from books such as *Pittsburgh, Our City*. This objective can also be accomplished by listening to the recollection of their parents on a tape recorder or videotape. Students should be given opportunities to discuss new vocabulary and concepts. The concept of shapes should be connected wherever possible.

To tie in the literacy component, the follow up activity to this lesson will introduce the students to a piece of fictional literature about "our city." As a hands-on activity the students will make their own fictional story about "our city", using their drawings with teacher recorded dictation to communicate their thoughts. The book that I chose for this activity is *Pickles to Pittsburgh* a story about two children who receive a postcard from their vacationing grandpa and get caught up in an wild dream in a make-believe world of food.

## Field Trips

Taking a field trip, such as the one previously described in the strategy section, would be the next step in this unit. I would suggest taking about three field trips throughout the implementation of this unit: at the beginning, near the middle, and at the end as a culmination activity. When on the first field trip, the students should be using the knowledge gained in the previous lessons and activities to acquire further knowledge and experience. Be sure to record information on trip sheets and with photographs so that this information can be used in upcoming lessons and activities.

### Lesson 3: The Circle

This lesson will focus on a specific shape, the circle. Its objectives are to build on the previous lessons and field trip experiences along with providing some hands-on follow up activities. This lesson addresses the pre-kindergarten communication standards 1A, 1B, 1C, 2A, 2B, and 3A.

The first step is to reinforce that the students can recognize a circle and describe a

characteristic of a circle. Singing songs and reciting rhymes (*Shape Rhymes*) about shapes work well for this. The children can then make a list of all of the places in "our city" that a circle can be found. This task can be done from memory, or by referring to the trip sheets and photographs from the field trips. Also, by reading a book such as *Circle City*, a story about various places in the city that a circle can be found you can help children with ideas.

Next I would use a center-based hands-on follow up activity. Taking an idea from *Simple Science Experiments with Circles*, I will combine a science experiment with a literary experience to further the students' knowledge of circles. First each child will be given a blank postcard, which can be bought at the post office or stationary store. You should explain to the children what a postcard is: a stamped card on which a written message can be sent through the mail. However, we will be doing an experiment with one first.

Each student will cut out a pre-drawn circle from the center of the postcard and predict if it will fit over their head. The children will then attempt to pull the postcards over their heads and they will soon discover that this is not possible. The children will then be given another blank postcard that the teacher has folded and pre-drawn lines to be cut on. Some of the lines will be drawn from the fold and some will be drawn from the opening. Be sure that the children pay attention to where the lines are drawn from and that they stop cutting when the line stops. The students will then cut across the crease and unfold the postcard. They will now be able to pull it down over themselves. This helps to strengthen the students' fine motor skills that they will need for upcoming writing activities.

As an extension of the science experiment and to introduce the literacy component I would then give each student a post card from "our city". The students would then "write" out a post card, by combining any of the following methods; drawing a picture, scribbling, tracing shapes, writing the letters of their name or teacher recorded dictation. These would be sent to an out of town relative or friend whose address would be obtained from the parents. In turn, they would receive a post card from another city, which would then be read to the class in an upcoming lesson or activity. You could also have some alternate addresses such as the local sports teams for children who can't get an address or don't remember to bring one.

### Lesson 4: The Circle (If I Were A Pittsburgh Steeler)

This lesson will use a circular Pittsburgh landmark, Three Rivers Stadium, and its football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers, to teach the children unknown facts about their city. This lesson addresses all of the pre-kindergarten standards: 1A, 1B, 1C, 2A, 2B, 2C, and 3A. An objective of this lesson is to expand upon their prior

knowledge of shapes and "our city". It will also provide a follow-up literacy based activity that will allow them to express their own thoughts and ideas. .

A good starting point would be to return to and review the experience chart from Lesson 2. Information gained from the first field trip, through trip sheets or photographs, can be added to the chart. The next step is to begin a discussion of a known concept that will lead them to discover some relevant and unknown information about their city.

This will be accomplished by discussing the Pittsburgh Steelers football team. I call this a known concept because everyone in "our city" is a Steelers fan. The discussion would be about things like what the team colors are who the players are. You could even tie in the facts that Three Rivers Stadium is circular and that a football field is rectangular. However, the most important point to be discussed is how the Steelers got their name. We know it's because they always steal the ball (GO STEELERS), but we can also turn this into a mini-history lesson of an unknown concept of "our city"- Pittsburgh as a steel town.

In order for the students to make a connection with the concepts of "our city" and steel, a variety of approaches should be used. Children can be shown photographs of "our city" as a steel town. *Pittsburgh-Then and Now* has some wonderful black and white photographs that represent both the past and present portraits of "our city". Also, a parent or a community volunteer could visit the classroom to talk about what it was like to live around all the smoke and smog or what it was like to work in the steel mill. The volunteers might even have some photographs of their own to share. The book *This Is Pittsburgh and Southwestern Pennsylvania We Live Here...We Like It!* has some good folktales about local legends. To bring the Steelers back into the discussion you can show the students a Steelers helmet and explain to them that on it is the symbol for steel, which are three diamond-like shapes. Then they would be shown an aluminum pop can and told that the same symbol is on the can because it is made of a by product of steel. Now they will know the real reason they are called the Steelers.

As an extension of this lesson and to bring in the literacy component I would read to the class the book *If I Were A Pittsburgh Steeler*. This is a great book that has a place to tape or glue the picture of a child on the last page. Each page of the story then shows a particular child as the Steelers football player acting out various plays in the game. Since every child will want their turn having their picture on the last page, you will tell them that they are each going to make a book of their own.

This is where the fine motor tasks and expressions of individuality come into play. Each child needs to pick a profession that they would like to have when they grow up. Their answers will be recorded on a list and then saved to be written on a pre-made blank book. The book should consist of about four pages of white paper. The first page will state: If I were a Pittsburgh (blank). The students will fill in the blank with their profession of choice. The next two pages will state something that profession is known for. For example, if the first page says-I want to be a Pittsburgh ballerina, the next pages would say something like-I will do twirls and I will wear a tutu. The children should offer their own thoughts and be guided by the teacher for ideas when necessary. If you want, you can bring in some phonemic awareness skills by demonstrating to the students how to sound out the letters of words

Students should draw pictures on the pages first, and then write or dictate words to go with the drawn pictures. As an optional fine motor task, they can then use scissors to cut out pictures to go with their drawings and words. For example if you find a picture of a ballerina in a magazine, the child could cut out the tutu and glue it onto their drawing. The last page is for their photograph that can be brought in by the parents or taken by you.

## **Conclusion**

Where should I put that writing center in my classroom? This is a question that you should be asking yourself if you do not already have one set up. This curriculum unit provided you with some information and ideas to get you to start thinking about implementing writing and literacy based lessons and activities in your pre-school classroom. It is not too early to develop these types of skills in your students. If you already are doing these types of lessons and activities you can use this curriculum unit as a supplement and extension of your own ideas and efforts.

During the writing of this curriculum unit, I discovered many resources and facts about Pittsburgh that were unknown to me. This is what the statement, everything is a learning process, is all about. I hope that you as a teacher will also learn along with the students when implementing this unit, through your implementation of the lessons and activities and in your search for additional resources. I am greatly looking forward to teaching this lesson in my own classroom. I already have a writing center, but the question for me is-what am I going to use as a circular landmark when they tear down Three Rivers Stadium?

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Web sites:

[www.realpittsburgh.com/community/yourtown-](http://www.realpittsburgh.com/community/yourtown-) virtual tour and virtual postcards

[www.clpgh.org/carnegie.html](http://www.clpgh.org/carnegie.html)-Pittsburgh-photographs

**Appendix A**

**TRIP SHEET**

**Name**

**Location of trip**

## Picture

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## Dictation

### Appendix B

#### Experience chart

**Question:** What do you know about your city?

**Responses:** Always document which student made the response

It is big.- Kayla

It is called Pittsburgh.- Michael

It has buildings.- Rashee

After lessons are taught and field trips are taken the students will gain knowledge and more information can be added.

It has three rivers that form a point.-Jada

This point is called the Golden Triangle.-Chelsey

When recording the students responses, make a point to show them you are writing from left to right.

## **Appendix C**

### **Pre-Kindergarten Communication Standards**

#### **Reading/Literature**

1A. Students will listen to, experience, and interpret a wide variety of high quality, age-appropriate literature.

1B. Students will be exposed to and begin to comprehend and interpret a wide variety of age-appropriate materials.

1C. Students will develop increasing proficiency in beginning reading skills and strategies including phonemic awareness and vocabulary building.

#### **Writing**

2A. Students will begin to organize thoughts and information and participate in writing to communicate for different purposes with assistance as necessary.

2B. Students explore gross and fine motor tasks to develop dexterity for pre-writing skills.  
(3-4 years)

2C. Students will begin to use, with some assistance, appropriate conventions or language in writing. (4-5 years)

#### **Speaking/Listening/Viewing**

3A. Students will use speaking and listening skills to communicate effectively.

## **Notes**

1. Diane, Gess Ed.D. "Developing the Writer in Your Child", New York, North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center, March 2000, page 1