Creative Writing Starts with a Sentence: Keep the Human in Humanities

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Abstract

The following research discusses creative writing and structures itself around big ideas—be those past, present, or future. Current scholars, students in elementary, middle, high, and post-secondary institutions, as well as the every day writer poring over drafts at Starbucks, may be noticing a shift in attitude toward creative writing and humanities classes. Reformation winds are pushing the sails of creative writing in different directions. Some individuals remain magnanimous about the field of liberal arts, while others are willing its extinction in education altogether.

Educational practices of 2018 are so far removed from the traditional way things used to be in the early 2000s, where consequential curriculum, retention in school from poor grades and behavior, and parents who parented were evident. Education and respect for such a valuable profession is the worst it has ever been because teachers don’t feel valued. More so, students do not know how to write a sentence, let alone craft something creative.

From origin to present day, creative writing under the umbrella of liberal arts education is a topic worthy of its surge in current research. This research focuses on the benefits of teaching creative writing, highlights viewpoints of individuals who scoff at its presence—especially in present day data-driven school curriculums—and discusses this type of writing as engaging student imagination, promotive of problem-solving skills, and fosters critical thinking.

A fortiori, it is a societal duty to make sure creative writing stays in school curriculums for the well-being of the writer in all of us. The future of creative writing
hangs in the balance of administrative hands—whose ruthless attitudes can either make or break a child’s pursuit of understanding, dignity, self-awareness and happiness.
Exposition

Creative writing is words on a page, however fragmented or disassociated. No matter how messy the narrative may be, the process begins by stringing words together. Thought deserves validation, and what better way than to write creatively? Sylvia Plath once said, “everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy is self-doubt” (545). Creative writing is a discipline for the writer within all of us to experience. It is an area of education in the humanities department worthy of existence and shouldn't dare be considered unimportant or blasé. One of the great energies about creative writing is the outlet it gives for students, faculty, and society. It allows the writer to write out their why, their purpose. More than ever, life is messy and stressful, full of personal and professional demands; perhaps writing creatively will carry out a need not yet known, making sense of this messy life.

Creative writing allows students the opportunity to tap into themselves, be raw and imaginative without worry of judgement. It is not cut and dry like argumentative writing, informational writing, or narrative writing. Under the umbrella of creative writing, the master puppeteer of plot twisting is fully controlled by the heart and emotion of the author. As author Harold Keables says, “[creative writing] may be a therapeutic course where students with sick personalities, anti-social tendencies, or emotional stresses write out their imbalance through creative expression and attain some curative value in the process” (356). Students who write creatively make gains that impact not just themselves as a writer honing their craft, but also in their mental health. Writing out the
imbalance inspired by the study of poetry or short stories, leads many individuals to a more purposeful life (Keables 356).

Since the 1980s, there has been a shift in attitude towards the humanities area of education. Both democrats and republicans are opposed to its existence in education at any level, which doesn’t sit well with advocates and educators passionate about liberal arts. The fall from favor is a story of financial cuts with political undertones to history, literature, and arts programs in higher education. Opposition to its place in school curriculums believe in cutting humanities departments at the university level to “rebalance funding towards more obviously ‘practical’ subjects” (Tworek). There must be neutral ground where all parties can find a resolution—one that doesn’t involve diminishing the pulse of education altogether.

The history of writing pedagogy started in the late 1800s. Notably, creative writing did not officially exist as a field at the time. Until about the 1920s, English composition classes and creative writing classes were so much the same, students didn’t declare the latter as a major (Sumpter 37). Fast forwarding through much turmoil and tension on whether or not creative writing could stand alone next to its composition and literature counterparts, scholars found reconciliation in the early-through mid 1990s where creative writing became a popular interest for students (Sumpter 347). At the University of Iowa, in the year 1936, students found solace in being able to express their best self in writing, painting, and composing music. They could earn their degree in a world where literature and the arts expanded and diversified.

In the realm of public education, research by Valerie Strauss and Justin Parmenter reiterates the necessity of keeping creative writing in school curriculums.
Both individuals identified seven valid reasons “why children should spend time writing creatively in class: to entertain, to foster artistic expression, to explore the functions and values of writing, to stimulate imagination, to clarify thinking, to search for identity, and to learn to read and write” (Strauss and Parmenter). However, the catch is all of these reasons “could never be measured on today’s standardized tests” (Strauss and Parmenter). Albeit engaging, creative writing in schools is losing its edge.

This genre of writing allows students the opportunity to meld both expressivist and social-constructionist impulses. At the University of Iowa, creative writing set the tone for schools across the country to blend writing and literature, expression and ideas, art and social practice into one curriculum. It is pure engagement, entertainment, and gives students an opportunity to self reflect. Authors Strauss and Parmenter see that “students need to feel that school is about them, and they need to feel connected to the content on a personal level. When students are given opportunities to experiment with their voices and create their own original work, they feel a sense of place and they are able to feel in charge. That’s when they shine” (Strauss and Parmenter). As Strauss and Parmenter elaborate further, when students are made to feel like their writing is validated, “it can transform attitudes toward learning and school in general.” Also, another benefit of keeping creative writing in school curriculums is that it can help foster a sense of community among students. Truthfully, in “[this] bitterly polarized society, any activity that fosters empathy and collaboration is well worth the time” (Strauss and Parmenter).

The possibilities of what defines creative writing is ambiguous. Author Harold Keables acknowledges that creative writing can take on various forms, such as “stories,
plays, verses, fiction, poetry, short-writing, formal and informal essays and articles, autobiographical sketches, descriptive pieces, and even library papers” (356). For example, a student’s composition about his or her summer job may have racial, social, or economic undertones that inspires a series of written or spoken poetry. Testimony involving familial conflict that may have come about “from temperamental, educational, or age differences” (Keables 358) could be developed into a fictional short story. Creative writing classes set the foundation for a lot of the writing done at the higher level.

In an article published in *The Atlantic* titled “A Passionate, Unapologetic Plea for Creative Writing in Schools,” Rebecca Wallace-Segal claims when “we stay true to our vision [as educators] we help [students] learn to write compelling, coherent short stories with creative transitions, character wants, obstacles, climax, dialogue, and resolve.” One of the best things about creative writing is the outlet it becomes for students to express themselves. It is “a safe space to make sense of the human dynamics around them, [and] teaches them writing at the highest level, going beyond lucidity into the realm of literary tension, and then further into humor, narrative complexity, abstraction, and metaphor” (Wallace-Segal). Creative writing for students can “spur debates about race and class assumptions and other social issues, and invite empathy” (Wallace-Segal). Teaching creative writing to students helps them grow as lifelong learners.

**Conflict**

Emotions run high in the field of education—especially when opinions on curriculum clash. Those with disbelief in creative writing, snark “it is not disciplined
writing…it is taught as a substitute for the essential training in exposition and persuasion that freshman courses in college composition require” (Keables 357).

However, educators, students, the writer within all of us, seek solace in the unmarked beautiful territory creative writing offers. Isn’t “academic, standard, informal standard, colloquial, nonstandard or vulgate” (Keables 358) discipline enough? Students have a wide platform to work on. The teacher’s role in creative writing is to teach, re-teach, and to “point out the variations of usages and their effective or ineffective use…keeping the writer’s intention always in mind” (Keables 358) pushing toward proficiency in writing. Educators would be pleased with a proficient, creative writer as their pupil.

Ironically, many educators are finding themselves in a negative mindset due to personal struggles, professional woes, the foreseeable outlook of the field. Cynic Professor Edwin H. of the Harvard School of Education boasted, “there is little value, for the able college-bound student, in ‘creative’ writing’…there can be a great deal of harm if [students] learn [this type of pedagogy]” (Keables 357). Ironic that a professor within the school of education feels this way about creative writing—a curricula anyone is sure to benefit from. How can creative writing be harmful? Of all that could truly damage a student such as: recreational drugs, drinking alcohol, driving in a car without a seatbelt, an apathetic state of mind, etc., creative writing makes the list? In response to Professor Edwin H., advocates of education have all the more reason to keep teaching and be proactive when the misanthropes come about. If students don’t engage in writing and creative curricula, advocating for their own education, that’s where a great deal of harm could be done. Adversity gives the writer within, all the more grace to keep writing.
Climax

In an educational system that is currently data and test driven, and financially dependent upon staying afloat, creative writing curriculum has taken a back seat in schools across the country. Liberal arts and humanities education is not at the forefront of administration anymore—classes preparing students for the workforce are. Is this initiative helping students and faculty or hampering growth in the field of education?

Unfortunately, political figures such as former Wisconsin Governor, Scott Walker, and provosts like Greg Summers at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, are not advocates of liberal arts education. Former Governor Scott Walker proposed “to rewrite the University of Wisconsin’s mission statement. Strip out its frills” (Wong). Frills such as professional development, service to the public, improving the human condition, and the search for truth. All of these components to a strong liberal arts education are too creative for Walker. Instead, Walker planned on eradicating the “Wisconsin Idea” of improving lives beyond the classroom walls [through liberal arts education], and “substituting the narrower goal of workforce education” (Wong). Workforce education, albeit valid, isn’t the answer for everybody.

Naturally, Walker’s proposal was flooded with rightful criticism from liberal arts advocates claiming humanities and liberal arts “builds the kinds of capacities that are useful in any kind of job: critical thinking, problem-based reasoning, understanding the science of how society operates” (Wong). Workforce education doesn’t have to come at the cost of liberal arts education.

Furthermore, Walker’s desire to scrap liberal arts education, isn’t far from provost Greg Summers at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Summers’ desire to phase
out six liberal arts majors—history, geography, geology, German, French and the two tracks within art—infusing them into new interdisciplinary majors that are career focused, could lead to disaster. Disaster involving layoffs of faculty who have tenure job protections, potentially “up to 70 jobs” noted by authors Alan Hovorka and Karen Herzegovina of the Stevens Point Journal, and a restructuring identity crisis of higher education for students taking liberal arts classes. Taking away this necessary component of education is robbing students and faculty of growth as a lifelong learner.

Data needs to be collected showcasing student and teacher growth in content areas. Data showcases progression or regression in competencies per curricular area, and more so, halos a light over accountability. Schools across the country are axing creative writing altogether because it isn’t bringing in the proper data—100% proficiency in student reading, writing, and mathematics on school report cards. Data from mandated assessments does not measure the creativity in an original haiku poem or fictional short story. The value of creative writing cannot be justified with a standardized exam. In the current data state of academic affairs, this is a valid concern.

Humanities classes across the country are being challenged to step aside and make room for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses. Alumni, students, and faculty past and present are ailed with growing pains as restructuring identities in curricula progresses forward.

More specifically, in an era of student debt and fiscal irresponsibility, Newspaper Point Forward discusses the restructuring proposal of University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point administration. The pulse of Provost Greg Summers’ proposal for restructure is financial and standard at best. The proposal aims to accomplish fiscal responsibility,
“through the facilitation of teaching and learning, leveraging the knowledge of our students, faculty, and staff to improve the region” (“Point Forward”). However, the fact that the word “leverage” is in this proposal, exudes clout and creates offense. Students “must resist the false choice between providing a broad, well-rounded education or narrow professional and vocational pathways” (“Point Forward”). Questions arise involving whether institutes of higher education should include specialty majors in academic subjects or keep more of a broad spectrum available. Do universities teach students skills tied to specific occupations instead of the traditional exposure involving broad skills of analysis, creativity and communication? This national push toward career readiness, “the need for academic programs to be well resourced, and a commitment to strengthening both academic majors as well as the liberal arts core to ensure students graduate with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives they will need” (“Point Forward”) are the thoughts of those pushing this proposal forward—all at the expense of American Studies, Art, English, French, Geography, Geoscience, German, History, Music Literature, Philosophy, Political Science, Sociology, and Spanish. Aren’t the latter 13 majors rigor enough for administration to keep on the docket?

Summers’ proposal ensures students at UW-Stevens Point will be provided with what they need academically. Through this restructure, a new normal will arise and “traditional liberal arts majors for students seeking applied learning to improve their career potential” (“Point Forward”) will be present. With a stronger liberal arts curriculum, students will become engaged citizens, well-rounded lifelong learners, equipped for their career with a professionalism equipped for the 21st century.
Despite Summers’ encouragement in the restructure, the formal process ahead alludes to low morale in faculty and students. To be frank, “there is no question that this will be difficult, disconcerting, and painful. Change of this magnitude is never easy” (“Point Forward”). In fact, change of this magnitude is heartbreaking.

**Best Practices**

To become a teacher of creative writing, best practices need to be in place. According to author Charles Whitaker, a writing focused curriculum needs to be an “establish[ed] positive atmosphere for writing, reading, and learning” in place (1). Within this environment are characteristics to foster. Some of these characteristics include: having an inviting classroom where the physical space is tailored toward discussion, collaboration, and use of resources. Whitaker mentions how “engaging students’ senses and emotions through a colorful room, artwork, and music, is a way to hold students’ attention and make them feel comfortable” (1). Another trait, perhaps most important, to have in place for a successful writing curriculum is respect for and among students.

To reiterate, Sara Sparks of *Education Week* believes “feeling respected transforms a student’s relationship to school” and vice versa. It is a catalyst for a positive mindset, which can change someone’s entire world for the better. Once this respectful atmosphere is established, writing teachers should “communicate that they are part of the writing community in the classroom and in the world at large and that they feel safe sharing this part of themselves” (Whitaker 2). Showcasing to students that educators are, in fact, human, makes a big impact on students. Proving that educators make mistakes in the process and drafting toward mastery is relevant.
Utilizing organization in the classroom helps maintain a meaningful approach to writing. Whitaker believes selecting a variety of meaningful approaches to writing helps hone in on creativity (3). Educators who draw on their experiences both personally and professionally help students succeed in the writing-focused classroom.

Another best practice used to help students develop as writers involves conducting mini-lessons on creative writing, arranging for students to develop further skill in the craft. Whitaker notes that educators who conduct writer’s workshops in the classroom foster learning. It is important for teachers to “refer to curriculum/assessment needs, their experience with their students, criteria for good writing, strategies used by writers, features of different genres, stylistic techniques, and, especially their own students’ needs as writers” (Whitaker 8). Mini-lessons in creative writing are an ideal vehicle for teaching usage and mechanics.

Making sure curriculum and student needs are being matched and met is key—especially in the eyes of administration. Common Core State Standards are clear goals and objectives for students to engage with during their time in school. Each objective helps prepare students in becoming career, school, and life ready. Theoretically, this is sound educational pedagogy. However, the reality is much different. Creativity in school curricula is lacking, and as high school English teacher Monica Bernhagen reiterates, “Common Core has led to canned curriculum which at the very least stifles creative teaching.” Stifled curriculum makes it hard for students to engage in creativity. Through the mandated integration of Common Core in schools, faculty and students have felt the strain. Common Core takes away the worth of creativity in the classroom, and from the range of possibility in teaching and learning. These standards, albeit good
intentioned, are a pipeline of prescription standards thought to be what’s best for students. For the majority, creativity has been slighted in the process.

**Falling Action**

Author Rebecca Wallace-Segall pleads with society to keep creative writing in curriculums because it is in the best interest of the student; however, some administrators raise eyebrows at it being taught to elementary age students. In Wallace-Segall’s research, New York City public school principal says, “I’m not sure if eight-year-olds should be permitted to have death or murder references in their short stories.” The grey area here is clear—exposing young children to traumatic content might bring about controversy for some. However, many students—elementary level to post-secondary—have already been exposed and/or taught about death. Creative writing serves as a cathartic outlet.

Wallace-Segall’s article touches on the topic of censorship in writing and when eight-year-old students “were told they could write a fictional story about anything they wanted,” light came to life in their eyes. Yes, “human beings young and old love exploring dark, fantastical themes,” (Wallace-Segall) but the controversy arises when young children across the board are exposed to the outlet of creative writing. When should admiration turn to worry, and when does it become a school’s responsibility? Naturally, educators troubleshoot by keeping a watchful eye on student writing and potential threatening behaviors.

In response to Wallace-Segall’s concern, it’s important to find a balance between allowing student choice and making sure that choice is fostered in a healthy light. If a
child writes about something concerning, proper channeling and protocol per school policy is in place for that exact situation.

In a case study by Harvard University graduate student Kate Roth and Northeastern University Kathleen Guinee, utilizing creative writing that requires interaction during instruction showed gains to the comparison. For example, student performance in response to a prompt indicated that those who participated “not only improved in their overall independent writing, but also made greater gains involving ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, spelling, and handwriting” (Guinee and Roth 331). Students showed rigor and commitment in this case study, and it payed off.

Knowing how to write is a vital skill everyone should have, especially since the United States of America’s employment market requires increasingly more advanced writing and communication skills. The bar for what counts as literate in our society continues to be raised (Guinee and Roth 332). Educators “play an indispensable role in a child’s process of learning to write, and thus, high-quality instruction is crucial to improving writing outcomes” (Guinee and Roth 332). The ultimate goal of effective writing instruction is to help students grow in their ability to communicate well, be it informatively, expressively, or in everyday conversation.

The act of writing is peaceful, especially in the confines of the right environment. Creative writing is powerful in its array of formats drafted in solace of many different places. From a paper and pencil sketch of a short story, to a Google Document of poetry, from a quotation taken from a beloved book, to an essay on stress that
resonates with the reader, the benefits of creative writing are just as powerful as the products writers create.

Furthermore, whether students take a stand-alone creative writing class, or need a space to purge thought, structuring moments for creative writing is important. As an exercise for writing teachers, have students begin every class period with a creative writing opportunity. Decide on an allocated time and notice how this outlet of writing sets the tone for the day. This may not be revolutionary pedagogy, but there are many benefits that come with in-class writing—especially “when they are carried out in every class period” (Gooblar). Class time is used wisely and made worthwhile when students begin every day of class with a writing prompt—even if it is drafting in a five-minute window. By providing a period of quiet for writing, educators “provide a clear break from the noise and distraction of the world outside [the] classroom” (Gooblar). Creative writing allows students to be their best intellectual selves, laying the groundwork for potential class discussion. Also, students who are shy or otherwise reluctant to speak out in class may find solace in creative writing. Dedicating time to write will yield students to think deeper and more critically, becoming better writers.

Furthermore, research by Berg and May also suggest “the mind requires time, the mind requires opportunity, and the rushed life does not always provide this” (21). Allow students the opportunity to write with credible intent during this sacred time.

Resolution

Creative writing in schools and as a field in higher education are in need of reform. Research by Stephanie Vanderslice titled Rethinking Creative Writing discusses
for students to be successful in their writing and showcase growth, curriculum needs to poised enough “to give students every advantage in the creative economy” (6). Writing programs in higher education must hold themselves accountable to their counterparts; push faculty to look within themselves, their pedagogy, to create positive change in dated curricula, prior expectations (Vanderslice 6). Allow students to grow through exposure to fresh classic and contemporary text. Also, allow time for reflection—both personal and as a large group discussion depending on class culture. Vanderslice reiterates that students must contemplate their writing to find purpose, inspiration, error, growth (6-8).

In the book Creative Composition, research edited by Danita Berg and Lori A. May, “it is the teacher’s job to keep students writing. Students need proof that they can write, a belief in and understanding of their process, and, perhaps most importantly, enthusiasm for putting pen to paper” (15). Acknowledgement and validity are important in the field of writing because they help encourage the writer within to keep writing, stay committed to being creative, and be open to learning.

In the article, Consensus through Accountability? The Benefits and Drawbacks of Building Community with Accountability by Tony Scott, educators who exhibit themselves as “listeners, responders, and encouragers” (56) when it comes to student writing, find success and growth in the skill set of the students.

It is important to note that not all students can be reached. Educators can put forth all of their effort toward a group of students, only to find themselves coming up short. That is the reality, no matter the demographic, year, capacity of classroom.
Research by Howard Smith says, “that emphasizing only one human ability leads to non-democratic classrooms in which elite groups of students will always do well and significant numbers of students will never reach or even discover their full potentials” (183). This realization leads those in the field of education to find solace in reform.

Heather Sellers book, *The Practice of Creative Writing*, shares perspective through the eyes of an educator. She expresses how important it is to take students through lessons on developing character, theme, and measuring out meter in craft. One of the best strategies to have under one’s belt when learning how to write creatively is to read creative writing.

Furthermore, creative writing makes life more meaningful and interesting. Recent neuroscience provides proof for what has been suspect all along: “the pursuit of creative writing measurably increases a person’s ability to observe, intuit, empathize, impose structure on chaos, read closely, and understand nuance. These skills will serve you well not just in your writing life but also in college and in every job you will ever have” (Sellers 2). Allow writing to enhance personality, to balance out the imbalance.

Everyone has potential to be a writer and create a tangible thought, one that can be seen on paper. Sellers reiterates this in saying:

CEOs write stories about the life lessons they’ve learned. Stay-at-home dads keep journals about their days’ pains, weirdness especially and joys. Video game creators go to graduate school, writing new games. Lawyers write poetry, ministers lead fiction-writing groups, schoolteachers create comics, grandmothers blog. Students, travelers, novelists, grocery store clerks, and
regular Joes and Janes create poetry, stories graphic novels, and screenplays (2).

Anyone is capable of writing creatively. One just has to learn how to practice the craft by finding the motivation within.

Creative writing was interdisciplinary long before ‘interdisciplinary’ became a buzzword. In composing writing, writers combine elements of architecture, psychology, philosophy, language, and scientific observation. In careful attention to detail, creative writers and scientists share a similar and complementary approach to the world. In designing and sustaining a creative writing life, writers have a lot in common with athletes and musicians, who know how to spend large blocks of time focused on one activity. And on top of all that, creative writing helps us become more thoughtful, discerning, and articulate [human beings] (Sellers 1).

Point Forward

When creative writing originated at the university level and came to be a sensation in the 1940s, society had a relationship with books. People couldn’t get enough of them, libraries were worshipped, and creativity was never challenged. Nowadays, the sentiment has changed. Society has changed.

Students are glued to their technology, incompetent at reading and writing, rude to authority, and apathetic at best. Where plot twists and rhetoric that never failed in the 1940s once was, relationship with the written word isn’t felt anymore. Perhaps, the answer to getting everyone on the same page is to begin writing again, open up to a
blank page and begin. Creativity is inside everyone and everything—some consider it the antidote to life.

In an article by Dan Barden, he brings the struggle to light. The struggle or pull of life creates a desire in writers and writing. With desire, comes conflict, and without conflict, a story lacks sustenance. Barden reiterates that evidence of desire makes a story worth reading. Writers are at war—with themselves, with others, with the very conditions of our life. Terror and failure nonetheless are the greatest gifts instructors can give to their students. In education, in any discipline, no matter the adversity, it is best to point forward and learn to evolve in this life.

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Reflection

Throughout the duration of my research on creative writing and its importance in school curriculums, my experience as an educator in K-12 for the past nine years has led to the following prompts. Each one is engaging for students and a platform for growth. Using them at the beginning of class as a bell ringer sets a strong tone for the day’s lesson, be it involve composition, literature, public speaking, or formative and summative assessment. The following prompts emphasize students to be authentic and honest with themselves as a writer, open to vulnerability with audience in mind. Students can use the prompts as a stand-alone writing exercise or to measure individual growth over time with the compilation of a writing portfolio. Pedagogically, the following creative writing prompts encourage students to learn through engagement, application, and reflection. The process of writing is embedded within each prompt, challenging students to authentically reflect to respond to the prompt. Students develop meta-cognitively, aware of their self efficacy, thinking about their own thinking—holding themselves accountable to the task. No matter the learning style or developmental level, each prompt is curated with high-quality and coherent design in mind. Students can be provided with individual constructive feedback, continually refining their writing abilities. The prompts were inspired through my undergraduate education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, English education courses taught under the direction of Professor Dixson, Professor Roloff, Professor Stephens, and Professor Balhorn, as well as poets Billy Collins and Taylor Mali who inspire me to be my best self.
Examples of Creative Writing for the Writer Within All of Us

- What’s in a Name? Names are an integral part of who we are. They shape our sense of who we are. Explore your feelings about the unity between self and name. Are these the names you would have chosen for yourself? Surname, middle name, Christian name? Is there a story behind your naming? Someone famous, a family member, weird initials? Does your name have symbolic meaning? Is it ethnic or historic or literary? Did your parents consider other names? In short, how do you live with your name?

- Personal Alphabet: Browse through a dictionary, looking for adjectives to describe yourself. Know the meaning of the words you select and be able to explain how each word you’ve chosen fits you. Choose at least one adjective for each letter of the alphabet. Be sure you choose the adjective form of words. For example, “excite” is a verb and “excitable” is an adjective. “Exciting” is a participle so it can be used as an adjective...but “excitable” and “exciting” mean very different things.

- Likes / Dislikes List: Make two columns, one titled “Likes,” the other “Dislikes,” and list from ten to fifteen specific items in each column. Avoid naming specific classmates and teachers by generalizing. For example, “that mean teacher who’s making me write an autobiography,” not my name!
Sensory Experiences: The five senses allow us to perceive whatever is tangible, or concrete. A sensory experience is something we can taste, touch, smell, see, or hear. For example, ice-cold water-melon, hot dogs sizzling over a charcoal fire, mosquito bites, fireworks, and the music of the ice-cream wagon are sensory experiences I associate with a Fourth of July picnic. Describe a specific time and place which recalls rich sensory experiences for you. Include at least two details that appeal to each of the five senses.

Metaphorical Definitions: This kind of definition helps make abstract words easier to understand by giving a specific concrete example. A famous metaphorical definition is “Happiness is a warm puppy.” For you, happiness may be something very different — a raise in your allowance, a banana split, a room of your own. Write metaphorical definitions of ten different abstract nouns. Your concrete example must be something specific that you can sense — taste, touch, smell, see, or hear.

Your definitions should follow the format below:

METAPHORICAL DEFINITION = ABSTRACT NOUN + IS + CONCRETE EXAMPLE

A Quality Personality: In J. Ruth Gendler’s The Book of Qualities, 70 abstract qualities come to life, walking and talking, borrowing Grandmother’s shawl and telling scary stories late into the night... personification at its best! Precise, specific images reveal each abstract quality as a vivid personality. After you read
samples in class, choose one quality from the list provided. Check the dictionary and the thesaurus, exploring possible meanings and hunting down synonyms. These qualities are real people, with weird relatives, bad friends, unique clothing styles, and strange stories to tell. Make your chosen quality a real personality, too. Complete a sensory cluster for your quality — sight, smell, taste, touch, sound. Then write and carefully polish a one-to-three-paragraph personification of your quality. Make every word count on this one!

- Color Your World: In color, and about color, this assignment honors every crayon ever nibbled by any kid. Although you don’t have to use crayons, use the color(s) themselves as part of your writing. You could write a poem about the things you associate with a specific color, such as all the blues there are! Or explain the colors you associate with different emotions. Or make lists of best colors to wear or drive in or... You have freedom with content here, since color is the key ingredient. Maybe a myth about “How Pink Was Born”?

- Room Sweet Room: We are territorial animals, instinctively seeking a place we can call our own. The rooms we live in and how we decorate them are as revealing as our clothing. Examine your own room and all the things that make it uniquely yours. Describe the room, not just by listing the things in it, but by conveying the feelings you have for the room and the items in it.
Personal Metaphors: Make a list of metaphorical comparisons. Think, “If I were an animal, what kind of animal would I be?” For each item, write the general label and then your specific comparison. Be realistic, be somewhat honest, and be able to explain your choices. Don’t say you are a rose, if you’re really a daisy.

1. Animal
2. Car
3. Article of Clothing
4. Day of the Week
5. Food
6. Color
7. Movie
8. Fragrance
9. Type of Building
10. Plant
11. Musical Instrument
12. Geometric Shape
13. Piece of Furniture
14. Song
15. Season of the Year
16. Television Character
17. Cartoon or Comic Character
18. Appliance or Machinery
19. Natural Phenomenon

20. Word

*Extended Metaphors: Go back to your list of personal metaphors. Choose five that you can extend by explaining the comparison in detail. Write a paragraph for each personal metaphor by giving four or five specific points of comparison. If you are like an alley cat, discuss four characteristics of an alley cat and explain the ways in which you have the same characteristics.

- Symbolic Recipe: Write a symbolic recipe for yourself. This means your ingredients are not blood, muscle, bone, and a hank of hair, but abstract qualities and personality traits (like patience, friendliness, humor). What is necessary to create you. Follow standard recipe format: a list of ingredients and exact measurements, followed by a paragraph of instructions, advice about the proper sequence of the steps, and any tips or warnings.

- The Ultimate Excuse: Just in case you are tardy some day, write an elaborate, exaggerated, fantastic excuse for yourself. Be as creative as you can. In about 150 WORDS, convince your heartless English teacher that your excuse is a valid reason for being tardy.

- Telling Tales: Think back to memories you associate with family storytelling. You know, the ones you hear over and over every holiday. Maybe these tales are the
legends that have given your family courage in hardship? Maybe they are religious stories or goofy songs or true family history? Maybe they all seem to be about what a bad kid you were? Embarrassing, hilarious, unbelievable? Retell a story you remember as part of your family's heritage or makeup one you wish had been told (and may tell in your own family circles later).

- Unfinished Sentences: Complete each sentence, expanding as much as you can. As always, be specific.

  I usually worry about...
  I feel angry when...
  I'm moody when...
  I'm happiest when...
  I feel confident when...
  I feel frustrated when...
  I feel depressed when...
  I am comfortable when...
  I feel nervous when...
  I feel sentimental when...

- Personal Symbol: Write about an object that has special symbolic meaning for you. It might be a gift from someone you love, an award of which you are proud, a souvenir from a place you miss, a childhood toy you still treasure, a family
photograph, whatever. Describe the object, appealing to the senses as appropriate and giving specific details. Also explain what it symbolizes for you.

- **Map of Life**: Draw a stylized map, beginning with your birth and ending with the present. Along the way, include little labels or diagrams of what you remember as important events, places, and people in your life. Keep all items in order, but leave enough space between individual items to fill in as you think of additional information. Write small since it must fit on one page. You may use branching paths or a legend.

- **A Mysterious Place**: Describe in a full page some place that seemed mysterious, exotic, or fearful to you. Concentrate on creating the same impression on your reader by a careful selection of sensory details which recreate the setting. Help us recognize what was special about this place. Or make up a fantasy place that has these qualities...just describe it well enough for us to believe in it too.

- **Synectics**: Synectics makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. It is the basis of all metaphor and involves the process of creative problem-solving. Each of the following sets of questions ask for choices between unrelated answers — answers which can be logically related somehow — and yet, there is no single correct answer. But correct answers would rephrase the question as part of the answer.
1. Which is wiser? a pen or a pencil?
2. Which is easier to forgive? a street or a sidewalk?
3. Which is smarter? a clock or a calendar?
4. Which is easier to teach? a question or an answer?
5. Which is like a contest? a cloud or a sunset?
6. Which is more fearful? new or old?
7. Which is like a promise? mathematics or science?
8. Which is more difficult? a dream or a nightmare?
9. Which is braver? an hour or a year?
10. Which has more pride? an entrance or an exit?
11. Which is easier to close? a road or a map?
12. Which is like a legend? a mirror or glass?
13. Which is more suspenseful? rain or snow?
14. Which has less charm? a signature or an autograph?
15. Which is more trustworthy? history or literature?
16. Which is more useful? a friend or an enemy?
17. Which is sadder? seek or find?
18. Which costs more? a home or a house?
19. Which is happier? music or art?
20. Which is like a valentine? the truth or a lie?

A Day in the Life: Write about a part of your life as if it were a passage from a novel. Refer to yourself in the third person — not “I woke up” but rather “she
woke up.” Exaggerate, elaborate, and prevaricate if you wish — there’s truth to be found in fiction, too.

- These Words Belong to Me: Make a list of words which have special power and magic. Think of common words with uncommon meanings, or even strange new words which allow you to think a new kind of thought. For example, do you know what “serendipity” means? Find out why it’s so wonderful. What’s ironic about a “scar”? List and define at least ten words. For each word, explain why this particular word belongs to you. Or perhaps give me a hint hidden in a question?

- In Other Words: Try expressing yourself through someone else’s words. Select at least ten “Quotable Quotes” which express your philosophy of life. Choose quotations which represent your thought on several aspects of life – not only love, but also faith, success, integrity, character, friendship, etc. List the ten you have selected, including attribution (who said it).

- Flashback: If you could relive one day or experience in your life, what would it be? You might choose to relive this time because it was so wonderful you want to experience it again, or you might choose a day you want to change in some way. Identify the day or experience, tell why it was so important to you, and explain what reliving it would accomplish.
Remembrance of Things Present: In twenty years you will have forgotten most of the things that fill your life now. What are the things about who you are now, what you enjoy and value, what you do with your time, and so on that you want to remember twenty years from now? Imagine what will be important to your memory of yourself later on. Write these things down.

As Time Goes Bye-Bye: Carpe diem (or, Seize the day!). Before time passes you by, what things do you want to do? What one thing do you most want to do by the time you are thirty-five? Why? What have you already said good-bye to – people, places, ideas, stages in your life, hopes, dreams, sorrows? Reflect on those good-byes and/or grand plans. Make a list with short explanations or concentrate on explaining one specific goal or farewell in depth.

My Own List of Lists: Now in its third edition, The Book of Lists lists facts from history, literature, science, entertainment, etc. For your list of lists, I have selected more personal topics. Write the general label for each category and underline it. Then list from six to ten specific items under each category.

People who have influenced me...
Places that make me happy...
Places I would like to go...
Things in people which I like...
Things in people which I dislike...
Things that worry me...
Things I would like to know how to do...

Things that have moved me...

Ideas that intrigue me...

My personal favorites...

- **Cheer Yourself Up!** Got the blues? Down in the dumps? Make a list of crazy things you could do to distract yourself from your troubles. Some possibilities — Play Frisbee with your old, worn-out records, smile all the way through class and make your teacher wonder what’s going on, or cover your front teeth with foil to look like braces. Think of your own ideas, both sane and crazy. You might want to draw cartoons to go with some of your ideas.

- **Metamorphosis:** Make a list of objects, places, ideas that could stand for your younger self, symbols for the way you used to be. Then make a contrasting list that could stand for your current self, symbols that represent the way you are now. Sort of an “I used to be...but now I am...” kind of chart. Use these contrasting lists to write a free verse poem on your transformation.

- **Picture This:** Find an acceptable visual image that you can actually include in your portfolio — a photo of friends, a copy of a well-known painting, magazine clipping, original artwork, etc. Paste it on the page with identification (caption, title and artist, bibliography, etc.) Then write a response, clearly stating your opinion of the work and supported by details from the work. Sound familiar?
• Look Who I Look Up To: Think of three people of established reputation whom you admire. You may need to do some formal research on these people, so don't choose your Aunt Helen unless she's in the encyclopedia. You must be specific. If you admire Martin Luther King, Jr., saying he fought for civil rights isn't enough. Exactly what did he do? Devote one solid paragraph to each person, telling what each person has done to deserve your admiration.

• Remembering the Child: Imagine yourself a sweet little toddler. How did others see you when you were very little? Interview someone who knew you as a small child -- one of your parents or grandparents, an older sibling, or an aunt or uncle, for example. Write about their favorite memory of you. Some possibilities are when you learned how to walk or ride a bike, a memorable sports game or musical event, a visit to grandparents, a special birthday, a fulfilling and relaxing evening at home, or anything else that stands out.

• One Medium Suitcase: Imagine that you are leaving home forever, and you can only take what will fit in one medium-sized suitcase with you. Specifically, what will you take with you and why? Explain.

• The Perfect Present: Since I am the perfect teacher, I have the ability to select the perfect present for each of you. It's something you've always wanted, something you've secretly yearned for. It's not a black Trans-Am or designer jeans because there's a catch -- the gift is intangible, or abstract. This means that
you cannot perceive it with the five senses. For example, you might want
patience, self-confidence, intuition. Tell me what the gift is, why it's the perfect
gift, why you need it, and how it will affect your life.

- Memorable Event: Include a ticket stub, program, or some other tangible
evidence to represent an event you experienced this year that in some way was
memorable. Describe the event, with whom you attended, what was special
about it, if you would do it again, etc. For example, you might describe a concert
of your favorite group, a special movie you anticipated, a family reunion, or a
birthday party. Don’t forget the evidence!

- How to: Write a paper explaining how to do something somewhat strange -- how
to wreck a car, how to break a heart, how to survive football practice, how to
make enemies, how to lose a job, how to get suspended, how to be miserable,
etc. This can be done as a list.

- Always Say Never: Make a list of books you never want to read again, places
you never want to go again, people you hope you'll never see again, things you
hope you'll never have to do again, and/or any other “nevers” you’d like to
explore. Now spend a page explaining the lists.

- Are You Hungry?: In great detail, using lots of description, tell us about your
favorite meal. Where is it served? When? Who cooks it? What dishes does it
include? What’s your favorite part of your favorite meal? This can be a home-
cooked meal or a fancy dinner out or even your usual fast food...whatever makes
you lick your lips.

○ Where I’m From: Using George Ella Lyon’s poem as your inspiration, compile a
list of specifics that reveal your roots. Specificity is the key – exact things, places,
traditions, sayings...Let where and what and who you are from reveal how you
have become who you are now.

○ Deck of 52: The enormously popular 52 Deck series offers whimsically illustrated
adventures and activities -- 52 Alternatives to TV, 52 Cheap Dates, 52 Relaxing
Rituals, 52 Things to Do in a Museum, 52 Great Books, 52 Romantic Films, 52
Adventures in Chicago (or LA or our town), etc. Create your own concept for a
deck and come up with a working list of what will be on each card. You may
collaborate with up to three more people on this, maybe even dividing the deck
into four suits like playing cards.

○ The Examined Life: Divide a sheet of paper in half. On one side, list the best
things about yourself. On the other side, list your greatest faults. Your good side
must be at least as long as your bad side! Note that, like everyone else in the
world, you have a combination of traits.
• Annual Report: Write a kind of annual report on the state of yourself. Compared to what you were a year ago, what are you now? What do you hope to be a year from now? What do you expect to be? Do you expect to make “progress”? If so, how has your last year proven your ability to progress? Are you better off than you were a year ago? Or worse off?

• Ekphrasis or Ecphrasis is a vivid, often dramatic, verbal description of a visual work of art—real or imagined: Select (and include) a painting or photograph which inspires you, and...be inspired! Write a poem, a story, an essay, or even create a parody. Include the original artwork and fully attribute it.

• Visually Speaking: Cut out words, phrases, logos, small photos, whatever impresses you visually and create a collage which expresses your ideas on a specific subject. There should be a title on there somewhere.

• Lessons I Learned After It Was Too Late: It seems that we always learn the most important lessons the hard way, usually when it’s too late, when we’ve already made our big mistakes. Look back over your life and write approximately a page on the lessons you learned after it was too late.

• The Door: Imagine you are sitting in your English class and it is almost time for the bell to ring. You are to write two paragraphs by completing the sentences below. Let your imagination loose, expanding and extrapolating from the
imaginative to the unbelievable. Think of dozens and dozens of details for each topic.

- When I walk out that door, I want . . .

- When I walk out that door, I don’t want . . .

- Advice to the Young: Based upon your experience, what practical information about life, living, and growing up could you give to a younger person? You may write this to a generalized “young person,” to the child you hope to have some day, to a specific young person you know, or even to your younger self.

- Who Am I?: Everyone is a combination of many selves. You play a variety of roles, such as student, brother or sister, friend, basketball player, music lover, worker, reader, and the like. Make a list of five nouns that you would use to identify yourself. What does the list suggest about your view of yourself as a person? Explain each role, citing your experiences as illustrations.

- Rewarding Experiences: List the ten most rewarding and beautiful experiences you’ve ever had. Write a sentence explaining why each experience was special to you. Let your list “jell.” After a few days, reread your list and think carefully about which experiences were most rewarding. Then in the margin, rank them from one to ten.
Valuable Lessons: List the ten most valuable lessons you’ve ever learned. Write a sentence explaining why each lesson was valuable to you. Consider such things as learning to multiply, but also think of the more abstract lessons concerned with wisdom and experience rather than skills. Once again, let your list “jell” for a few days. Then rank the lessons from one to ten in the margin.

Futures -- Fantasy and Fact: This is a three-part assignment. In the first paragraph, pretend that you can see yourself 10 years from now. Describe your future as it could be if all your wishes came true. This description is “romantic.” In the second paragraph, describe what your life will be like 10 years from now if you continue just as you are now. No miracles or magic allowed. This view is “realistic.” For most people, the “romantic” and “realistic” descriptions are very different. In the third paragraph, analyze the discrepancy. Discuss the specific differences between your two descriptions and how you feel about these differences. Finally, explain the steps you can take to find a sensible compromise between the romantic and the realistic.

In the span of 180 days, which is the length of a school year in Wisconsin, poetry is a great way to incorporate creative writing into every day life. Billy Collins’ Poetry 180 encourages students, exposes students, and lifts the human spirit. Furthermore, “poetry can and should be an important part of our daily lives. Poems can inspire and make us think about what it means to be a member of the human race. By just spending a few minutes reading a poem each day, new
worlds can be revealed. Poetry 180 is designed to make it easy for students to hear or read a poem on each of the 180 days of the school year. Selected poetry is based with high school students in mind. They are intended to be listened to, and I suggest that all members of the school community be included as readers. A great time for the readings would be following the end of daily announcements over the public address system. Listening to poetry can encourage students and other learners to become members of the circle of readers for whom poetry is a vital source of pleasure. I hope Poetry 180 becomes an important and enriching part of the school day."

- Prompts grounded in specific places, images, and events aim to inspire students to be creative. In the book *Sky Blue Water* by Stephanie Watson and Sarah Warren, a number of writing prompt examples include: "What is one thing you feel passionate about? In one sentence, explain your opinion" (Wickersham 231).

- Think of a task you know how to do very well, like pumping up a bike tire or cooking an egg. Now think of a particular person for whom you will write step-by-step instructions of how to do this task. Be sure to introduce the topic and give a preview of what you’re about to explain. Use specific detailed language. As you write, keep your audience’s age and skill level in mind. Use transitions as you move from step to step. (Wickersham 232)
Close your eyes and think of a place that’s very familiar to you. How does it smell? What does it sound like? What do you see around you? Who else is there? Do you know anything about the history of the location? Make a list of these details. Now write a paragraph to describe this place to someone from another country or another planet. (Wickersham 233)

Pick a place where you have always wanted to live—Chicago? Paris? Shanghai? Hollywood?—and pretend you just moved there. Write a letter to a friend or to your parents describing your new home. Include as many details as possible. Is the weather nice? What does your home look like? What do you do for fun? If you’ve never actually been to this place, you can either make up details or visit the library to research facts.

What is your favorite way to spend a lazy day?

Have you ever spoken up when you saw something going on that was wrong? We’re you scared? What ended up happening?

What is your favorite work of art? What do you love about it?

Write a diary entry, dated 10 years in the future.

Give your city (or town or region) a new name that reflects what type of place it is and explain why you chose that name.

Write about something presently in your life that is “worth it.”

You are the wind’s interpreter. What is it saying?
o Come up with a mathematical formula to express something you know/believe.
   (Example: Long Saturday run + Frappuccino = Happiness)

o Name one thing you have lied to yourself about. Why did you do this?

o What did you get into trouble for the most when you were a kid?

o Do you prefer taking risks or having a safety nest?

o Complete this thought: “I wish I had paid more attention when…”

o What do you look forward to every week?

o Were you born to shine in one special way? What makes you really stand out?

o What stupid question have you heard someone ask (or asked yourself)?

o When was the last time you got lost?

o What area of your life do you tend to enjoy in excess instead of moderation?

o Write about three realistic goals you would like to achieve in your lifetime.

o List a few phobias you have. When and how did you discover you had these fears?

o You are a children’s book writer. Write the first few lines of your new book.

o If you had been able to choose, would you rather have been an only child or part of a very large family?

o If I looked into your fridge right now, what would I find?

o Have you ever experienced something that just could not be logically explained?

o What do you need right now?

o It is the end of your life and you are up on stage being presented with a major award. What award is it, and what have you won it for?

o What modern technological device takes up most of your time?
- Have you ever had the rotten experience of having to put a pet down?
- Have you ever lived in another country besides your country of birth? Would you want to?
- What is the first thing you do when you wake up every morning? Why?
- Write about something you purchased used.
- What color do you feel like today?
- If you were to teach as a career, what would you teach?
- Write about a time everything changed in the blink of an eye?
- Write about a souvenir you have bought or received.
- What is the biggest trigger for stress in your life?
- What was the last thing you read, heard, or saw that inspired you?
- Complete this thought: “I wish an alarm would notify me whenever…”
- What are you recovering from right now?
- Write about something you would still buy if it cost twice as much as it costs today.
- What do you think is the most important thing for today’s kids to learn in school?
- What is the best road trip or vacation you have ever taken? Who was there?
  - Where did you go? What did you see along the way?
- You look outside: Ah, it is snowing! But look closer. Those are not snowflakes falling from the sky! What is it snowing at your house?
- What have you been able to accomplish this year that you are really proud of?
- Write about something you frequently forget.
- Write a quick love story. The story must end badly.

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Why do you think some people are successful in life and others are not?

Look around you and choose an object in the room. Now write something from the point of view of that object.

Write about a memory you have related to a campfire.

What is a memory you would like to erase?

What traffic sign best describes your life right now?

What do you think is the most important question in life?

What do you love doing that you wish you could get paid for?

Write about a messy area in your home, workplace, or life.

What takes too long?

What is the best excuse for being late that you have ever heard or used?

If your house was on fire, what would you grab before escaping?

When was the last time you pulled an all-nighter? Why did you do it? How did you feel afterwards?

What is your favorite holiday ornament or decoration? What makes it so special to you?

Do you have anyone in your life that has acted as a mentor to you? Have you ever helped someone else out in this way?

What special traditions or holiday celebrations does your family observe?

Have you done any research into your ancestors? What interesting surprises have you discovered?

Write about a time you said no.
Think back to your childhood. Write about an article of clothing or an outfit you remember one of your parents (or another influential adult figure) wearing.

Write about the last time you felt guilty.

Write about the most recent gift you gave someone.

What expert do you wish could come teach you what they know?

Write about a memorable experience you had staying at a hotel.

Imagine you are a news anchor. Write the beginning of tonight’s newscast. Make the top story what you truly think could happen today, or what you wish would happen today.

If you could have one talent that you do not naturally have, what would it be?

What is your favorite game to play?

Do you absolutely hate any food that other people usually like?

Write about a song and the memories or feelings it evokes in you.

Periodically we have tension build up in our lives that requires a release of some kind. Some people cry; others punch; some find a creative outlet. What is your release?

Where do you like to do your journaling? At a desk, in your bed, at the coffee shop?

Write about something you made by hand.

What is one of your greatest blessings?

If this week had a theme, what would yours be?

Write about the middle of something, anything!

What do you have to do today that you really would rather not do?
- What is something you have learned lately?
- You have magic soap. What does it wash away?
- What is something totally overrated in your world?
- Snakes: interesting or creepy? Why?
- Which do you prefer: sunrise or sunset?
- Look around you right now. What is wrong with this picture?
- What do the clothes you are wearing now say about you?
- Write about an experience you had when you lost track of time.
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