

Unit Eight – Memoir

May

Overview of the Unit

In order to put ourselves on the page with honesty and intensity, we and our students need to write within a community of trust. As we ‘round the final bend of the year, this is a good time to teach what it means to really listen to each other and to ourselves.

To teach this unit well, you’ll want to read either Katherine Bomer’s *Writing a Life* or *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well* from the series, *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3-5* (Heinemann, 2006). Plan on this being an amazing, beautiful, moving, climatic unit. In this unit of study on memoir, you can teach students to compose pieces of writing but also to compose lives in which writing matters. When we, as writers, really listen to ourselves and each other, an entry or a topic can grow in significance.

Collecting: Writing to Discover Our Thinking and Writing With Depth

At the start of the unit, you may want to invite students to search for Life Topics. Life Topics can be found by rereading notebooks, reconsidering lives, and by living, conscious of the topics that feel intensely alive and close to the heart. Students often begin by writing about gigantic Life Topics, such as ambivalence over growing older, worries over weight, an appreciation for one’s grandmother. A second-step will be to remind them of the saying, “The bigger the topic, the smaller we write.”

In some classes, students in this unit of study refer to their seed idea as a *blob* idea, imagining a glowing, living, amorphous form. Students learn that the process of choosing a seed idea is a more flexible one than they’d first learned, and that, as they live with a Life Topic, their sense of what it is they really want to say changes. You will probably

encourage writers to use writing as a way to develop their own ideas and associations around a Life Topic, writing-to-learn in their writers’ notebooks.

If you are angling this unit so as to support independence, you will probably tell students, “This time, you need to compose a writing life for yourself. You can draw on any strategy you have learned this year, or invent new strategies. Your job is to decide what to do in order to write something that captures all you want to say.” This unit, then, allows you to encourage students to shake free from any scaffolds that limit them, to make resourceful use of scaffolds that help, and to do all this in the service of their own important writing projects. As students invent this writing project, they will also be inventing their own identities as writers, preparing themselves to go forth with independence into the rest of their lives.

In this unit, your emphasis will probably not be so much on strategies for *generating* writing as on strategies for *writing with depth*. For example, you may want to teach students that writers sometimes find it helpful to write about a single topic from several perspectives. Usually ideas about any one topic are complicated, so once a writer has written about one set of ideas on a topic, the writer can come back and revisit the topic,

writing an entry that begins, “On the other hand . . .” In the end, some of the best writing will result from efforts to get mental and emotional arms around the full breadth of a topic. Then, too, we teach students the wisdom of Eudora Welty’s advice, “Write what you *don’t know* about what you know.” Where are the mysteries, the questions, the feelings of angst for you in this beloved, close-to-home topic?

Using Literature to Support Memoir Writing

Students will read literature in this unit first because great literature can serve, as Kafka writes, “as an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us.” Literature calls us from our hiding places, helping us to bring ourselves to the page. The importance of this can’t be over-emphasized. Of any quality of good writing, the one which matters the most may be that elusive quality writers refer to as *voice*. A person writes with voice when that person allows the imprint of his or her personality to come through in his or her writing.

But students also read literature in order to study the craftsmanship of other writers. Because students have responsibility for imagining a way to structure their memoir, they will read the memoir that other authors have written with a special attentiveness to structure. That is, in this unit, you may not want to say, “This is how your writing will be structured.” Instead, you may decide to teach students that writers often begin with an emerging content, and then combine and create structures (drawing from our internalized repertoire of structures) that will allow us to say whatever it is we want say.

As students develop their seed idea (or their “blob” if it feels too big to be called a seed!), it will be crucial for them to ask themselves, “What is it I really want to say?” This is a memoir, so the draft will not be about the events alone. Instead, it will be about the person to whom those events happened. Students need to think, “Who do I want to be in this writing?” “What am I trying to say about myself in this piece?” “What am I realizing about myself as I write this?” “What do I want my readers to know about me?” Once a student has begun to figure out what he or she is trying to say, it will be important to deliberately write in ways that highlight that meaning.

Although writers can make calculated decisions to organize a text in one way or another, the actual process of writing is more passion-hot than critic-cold. Milton Meltzer, the great nonfiction writer for students, has said, “In the writer who cares, there is a pressure of feelings which emerges the rhythm of sentences, in the choice of details, in the color of the language.”

Drafting: Calling Forward What We Know About Structure and Creating Our Own Structure

When it comes time for students to begin thinking about starting a draft, you’ll want to invite each student to first plan out how his or her piece might go. It helps to tell students that when a writer’s content is so rich and so precious to us, we don’t just pour it into a pre-fabricated form. Instead we invent a form that will carry the message we want to convey. Will the piece contain one focused narrative? Two stories held together by some exposition? Will there be a thesis and development?

You’ll want to invite students to study pieces which illustrate that writers often combine narrative as well as essay structures into single pieces which defy easy labels. “Eleven,” by Sandra Cisneros from *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* could be in that folder—and don’t worry if students have studied it before. I also recommend “Not Enough Emilys” from *Hey, World, Here I Am* by Jean Little and “My Grandmother’s Hair” by Cynthia Rylant from the anthology *Home*. You may want to invite students to

examine their texts for structure, boxing out sections that resemble the narratives they will have written all year and sections that resemble essays.

Some students will write their narratives as a story, while others will write a collection of short texts. Some students will write essays that are more journeys of-thought rather than traditional thesis-driven essays. The choice of structure needs to be left in the writer's hands this time. Mostly, students discover that the structures they've learned to use throughout the year are not as inflexible as they once thought, and they create texts which are hybrids, containing perhaps one long narrative section set off against a thesis-driven expository paragraph.

As students create structures that will support their content, they will learn about revision in a whole new way. They will come to understand that writing is a process of growing meaning, and that writers use strategies as needed, as we reach to create meanings that feel deeply significant and personal.

Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

If your students are writing memoir, this means that you've probably spent a good deal of time reading aloud vocabulary-rich memoir leading up to this unit to support students' knowledge of the content. As you read aloud your kids are being immersed in rich vocabulary and literary language. Encourage your kids to use new vocabulary when they turn and talk about the texts you read. Do not be surprised if they are reluctant to use the new words unless you remind them to do so. Many teachers find it helpful to create simple charts of some of the new vocabulary to display around the room during writing time, to remind kids to use the new words when they are talking *and* when they are writing. Throughout this unit, encourage kids to refer to the charts to find just the right words to use, and to write it using the words a scientist would use.

Good writing is also rich with words with meaning-based spelling patterns (or morphemes). By now many of your students are at the stage of spelling where they have begun to study some of these meaning-based spelling patterns. Earlier in the year we taught them some simple strategies for using the meaning of a word to help them spell unfamiliar words. At this point in the year, you will probably want to revisit that strategy, only this time, it's not just the prefixes and suffixes of words that might hold meaning, it's also the root of the word. Teach kids to use the roots that they've been studying during word study to help them spell tricky words during writing workshop. Remind partners to encourage each other to use this strategy in addition to all the other strategies they've learned so far this year. Of course, you'll only refer to roots of words as a strategy for spelling if you have been doing that sort of work in your word study time of day, particularly if you are using *Words Their Way*.