

Writing to Learn History

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Effective thinking skills are an important part of the social studies curriculum. It is not enough for students to be able to see, hear, or read material; they must understand and interpret it. Under the influence of writing-to-learn techniques, students improve their ability to understand and interpret, thereby gaining greater mastery of the material in my courses.

I use the **journal** for most of the student writing during the semester. Journals, if used conscientiously, can help students to develop their thinking skills. By writing, students move toward more complete understanding of what the class is studying. Journals also help me to be a better teacher because if students are confused about something, scanning the journals usually makes it easy for me to locate their confusion.

I have students write **lists**, **clusters**, and **focused writing** in their journals so they and I can see how well they have absorbed material covered in class. I also use **dialogues** to help students develop an understanding of different points of view. Other techniques that help students take a new perspective are **biopoems** and **unsent letters**. Although this chapter concentrates on Washington State History, I have used the techniques discussed here in my other social studies classes as well.

Introducing the Techniques

The ninth graders in my state history class are new to the high school and many are strangers to one another. Although a few are accomplished writers, most of them "know" they don't write well; at least so they've been told. All of them have to be eased into the idea that they are going to do a lot of daily writing in a history class.

My first goal for these students is that they loosen up their writing. It is hard for students to accept the notion that writing, like other skills,

can be improved with practice and conditioning. I want them to write freely and openly, without concentrating on each thought, to realize that not all the writing in their journals needs to be good writing.

The first writing assignment I use is ten minutes of focused writing in their journals. Students are to select a favorite vacation spot in Washington and describe it. This gives them a topic they'll be familiar with and enjoy writing on. The key is to write for ten minutes without stopping.

After writing, students are asked to share what they've written. My purpose here is to have the students describe the natural geography of a part of the state they're familiar with. They will have to think of the specifics that make its geography appealing. These writing exercises will help them better understand the environment they live in. For the next day's assignment each student selects one place name from the state and researches its origin.

On the following day we discuss legends briefly just to make sure they all understand this genre. Then I give students a ten-minute journal assignment of creating a legend about the origin of the place name they've chosen. This gives them an opportunity to write imaginatively about the information they gathered the previous night, and it is also a stepping stone to the next assignment.

On the third day the ten-minute focused writing asks students to assume the role of one individual from their legend and write about it in the first person. This **role-playing** helps students think about a situation critically and makes the learning experiences more personal.

Up to this point, the students have had fun writing, the topics have not been threatening, and we've established several things in the class: journal writing, creative thinking, nonstop writing, and writing about history in the first person. All of these will make it easy to slip into more academic subject matter later. The important thing is that students have already started developing their skill for writing to learn, so the time is not "lost."

A Natural History Unit

The first unit in my course presents the geography and geological history of the Pacific Northwest incorporating several types of writing activities. After viewing the film *Cascade Winter*, students list all the words or phrases that they can recall from the film. As the student example illustrates, this is an alternative to traditional note taking.

glaciers wind
 Mt. Rainier
 cloud cap
 isolated groups
 in snow fields
 snow
 covered
 jagged
 peaks sharp
 ridges
 ice
 encrusted
 green deep
 forested snow
 trees mountains
 Cascades sea of peaks
 7th heaven deep valleys
 new snow boulders
 skiing water long hikes
 moguls Stevens Pass rivers streams
 bums
 cruising teaching equipment dams
 chief electricity
 PUD
 Seattle Light

The following day I assign a ten-minute focused writing on *Cascade Winter*. The ten-minute focused writing makes students write quickly. Like many entries from the class, Julie's entry catches the feeling and meaning of winter in the Cascades. Her use of metaphors adds to her understanding of the theme of the film.

Julie Potter

Cascades in Winter

The snowflakes fall gently through the air and trees then land silently on the snow that has fallen before. The trees are caked with white powder and they droop with its weight. All the trees that in the spring will turn green are now empty, barren of leaves.

Through this stark whiteness a stream flows, cutting its path through the fallen snow, dipping and turning in waterfalls and over rocks. Icicles hang everywhere, clear points ready to drop and pierce any living thing passing below. Looking closer you can imagine yourself in a magically haunting world where these wet stal-

agtites are fortresses that are ruled by powerful ice-lords. The sun reflected from the ice and snow gives everything a crystalline aspect. Now the snow has stopped, the whole world stands still except for the sound and movement of the running brook.

Something is moving farther up, among the high peaks of the mountains. The winter wind sweeps over the slopes, slowing moving the snow. The wind creates and destroys clouds and mists as it goes. The wind-swept mountains stand and take the beating majestically, as if they will stand forever.

This sequence of listing, clustering, and focused writing helps students move from scattered recollections to coherent thinking on what they are learning. If I choose to assign an essay about the film, students are well prepared to write it, but in any event, they have used writing to learn about the Cascades.

Following the general introduction to a study of the geography and geology of the Pacific Northwest, I use the film *Volcanic Landscapes* as the springboard for a look at the role volcanic activity has played in creating the environment of the Pacific Northwest. Before I show the film, I tell students to select one item from the film to write about in the first person.

That item can be a form of volcanic rock, a volcanic land form, or a kind of volcano. The film is in two parts, and I use only one part a day. After seeing each segment, the students list thoughts as they had done earlier. Next, they individually choose one item and cluster it. They use the remaining five to eight minutes to write in their journals on the topic they had selected. These writing exercises helped the students assimilate and organize a lot of new information.

After viewing the film, listing, clustering, and completing journal writing, the students had a day in the library to do additional reading on the topic they had chosen. They were to write about their chosen item in the first person, describing how a specific volcano landform was created, what it looks like, its texture, and so on. This became the first of what students dubbed "I am . . ." papers. They joked about it at first but ended up having fun writing them. Almost anyone could go to the library and select information on a topic, organize it into a standard essay to be turned in and graded, without really understanding the topic. Students who write "I am . . ." papers, however, seem to understand their material.

Writing from the first person personalizes the assignment. It requires students to understand what they are writing about so that they can be creative with it. This level of student involvement has sold me on writing to learn. Students were excited about turning in what they had created.

I remember trying to talk one young student, Crystal McCormick, out of selecting the topic she had chosen: lava stalactites formed in lava tubes. I anticipated she would have difficulty finding enough information to complete the assigned one to two pages. When she turned in the following piece, it was evident she had caught the essence of the assignment completely.

I am lava all around,
 Gases emerging and burning into steam,
 Taking everything that stands before me
 I move sluggishly across the land.
 Slowly,
 My outer layer cools,
 But my inside still turns
 Forming a tunnel.
 I feel movement beneath,
 Rushing air,
 The still liquid part
 Tries to fill the tunnel
 cooling as it descends.
 Forming
 A column of basalt
 dangling from the roof of the cavern.
 I am
 A pillar formed from fire,
 now frozen as ice.
 I am
 A stalactite.
 I am.

My goal was to make sure each student's writing demonstrated understanding of one volcanic landform in depth. Although she chose to use a different format than essay, Crystal creates with very few words the correct image of a lava tube forming, the hot gases melting its insides, causing remelted lava to drip down forming stalactites. Her words are well chosen, especially when she compares them to icicles, pillars formed from fire now frozen.

Another example is written by Jessica Chinn, who assumes the role of obsidian. She is accurate in describing it and very creative in putting the material together. Both of these students had time to learn and understand the material in order to be creative with it. Writing caused them to make a personal connection with the learning. I believe that will make the learning and thinking they went through more meaningful.

My friends and I are anxiously waiting for the time when we shall have the chance to see a brief glimpse of the outside world. For

days I have been waiting ever so patiently underground, my inside boiling and raging with anticipation as I hear my friends and relatives asking the much repeated question, "Is it time? Is it not yet time . . . ?"

I can not believe it. Today is THE day! Somewhere deep within me I can feel it . . . for suddenly I feel myself being pushed upward. Higher and faster are we going; melting and completely destroying every obstruction that blocks our path.

For some unknown reason I am feeling a great pride for being part of this particular lava flow. Just think, I am destroying at least 50 square miles and enjoying myself at the same time; very unusual for lava like me . . .

. . . but wait! What is the matter with me? Why do I feel this terrible hardness slowly creeping through my body . . . ?

. . . "Hold on!" I shout, "Please wait for me. Don't leave without me!" Alas, there is nothing my friends can do, they have no choice but to keep on moving forward, occasionally turning around to cast me one last sorrowful glance . . .

I am just now celebrating my ten thousandth birthday. And during those 10,000 years I have gone under considerable change.

Instead of merely being a lava flow. I am now a shiny, black piece of obsidian fashioned into a jagged arrowhead made by some desperate Indian hundreds of years ago. I lie in the dirt now, waiting for fate to do its job . . .

At the end of the semester students seemed to remember far more about Washington state geology than they had in previous years. I think this is because they had spent more time thinking about the material and using it on a higher level of thinking rather than just memorizing for tests.

From geology we go to a unit on geography and a study of the internal regions of the Pacific Northwest. **Guided imagery** is one of the best tools for this unit. It was a way of asking students to think about and describe what had been studied in class. We start with the Coastal Region, and I show the film *Hoh Rain Forest* without sound and then ask students to list and cluster information about the forest. Next they write about a hike through the Hoh Rain Forest. This exercise takes the better part of an entire period. Using guided imagery I gave them situations, and they filled in the details using what they had learned of the region. My guided imagery is in the first person, and it begins as they get up early the morning of the hike to catch the first ferry from Edmonds and drive around the peninsula to the trail head. After they have been hiking (in their minds) for about an hour, I recite aloud to help them with their writing.

Describe what you are thinking about, what the river looks like, what the trail is like, and make other general observations about what you see.

The sun has come out, yet it is still cool . . . Why?

Something brushes your face. . . . What is it?

Time for a rest stop. You look around and find an ideal spot. Describe it. Then you begin to speculate how it got there and why it was there.

Hiking along later, you observe some animals off in a clearing. Describe them.

Later, along the trail, you crouch low to look at something. What is it?

Mid-afternoon, you set up camp. What are you going to do with the rest of the day?

After dinner, as the sun is setting you listen quietly to the sounds of the rain forest. Describe them.

Describe the weather the next morning.

Here is one student's response to the guided imagery:

A Hike through the Rain Forest

We're starting on the bark-covered trail into the wild wonder of the Rain Forest. There's moss growing over the trail so you can barely tell there's bark underneath it. I can tell they haven't covered it with bark in a long while. The river is moving rather rapidly, dodging the rocks and fallen trees and branches. The sun is coming out and shining rather bright. The forest is still cold though. It's like there's a giant reflector over the forest reflecting the heat so it will stay cold. We're taking a break to rest up a bit. There's an old nursing log with some trees and rocks by and on it. We like this place because there's a good place to sit and rest. There's a lot of action going on here. Some birds are in the trees above us. We're back on the trail now some moss hanging from a tree brushed my face. It's fascinating how it just hangs from this tree. . . .

This assignment has the student doing several things at the same time. As it moves along, they have to recall information; interpret what they have seen, heard, and read; and apply that information appropriately. Not only do they recall information, they demonstrate understanding by recalling appropriate information at the right time. Also, it allows them to be creative in how they use or describe the information. My students take pride in the writing they do in response to guided imagery.

You can adapt this technique to any region. Use a car trip, vacation trip, bike trip, or anything that causes the student to move through an area and think about it. I don't teach world geography or world history, but I believe guided imagery would be fun and productive in these courses.

Later, while studying the Columbia Plateau region and after showing the film *Fresh Country Apples*, I asked each student to select a location for their apple ranch and role-play about being an apple rancher. I felt this was a way of helping them understand more fully what it would be like to live in the Columbia Plateau area. They were to start with the winter season and describe what chores they had to do and then cover spring, summer, and fall. The following example was written by Shelley Grasmick, a student who has learning difficulties and previously had trouble writing. She had not read a single journal entry until her reading group chose this to represent them. I felt she had come a long way.

In the beginning of the semester she had difficulty completing essays. Here she had no trouble describing the seasons of an apple ranch. It was exciting to hear her read it without hesitation.

Agriculture-History

Apples

Well, its about 9:00 and there's a foot of snow on the ground. We're going to start trimming the trees today and get them ready for spring. It's about 22 degree above 0 degree right now and the sun is shining bright. It's a perfect day for work.

The glaciers have been melting now for about a month and the trees are starting to get leaves and blossoms on the branches. It's still real cold at night. The frost detector has gone off four times this week. It's a good thing we have technology or the crops could be totally ruined. The weather has been mostly sunny the last couple weeks, and the bees have been buzzing around pollinating the trees.

The apples are small right now and I'm not worried about them yet, in about a week I'm going to have to start thinning them out so most of the apples can get lots of sun.

It seems to be a real good crop this year. The apples have been progressing wonderfully in the last few months and are ready for harvest. Everyone is going to start harvesting the apples in about 3 days.

Writing to learn helped Shelley understand course material more completely and gave her the confidence to share her learning with the class.

A Unit on Native Americans

Unit II focuses on the Native American Indian culture of the Pacific Northwest. As we progress through different aspects of each culture's food, clothing, shelter, religion, and customs, students often write in the first person. Usually I assign them a specific role such as young adult (male or female) or elder. Topics include building your long house,

fishing for and preserving salmon, winter ceremonies, and food gathering among the Coastal Indians. Among the Plateau's culture area they could describe their housing (there are several types to choose from), fishing for salmon along the Columbia River on a tributary, hunting in the fall, or pressing food for the winter. The important thing is that I take time every day to have them write something in their journals that summarizes or reflects on what was covered that period, or allows them to ask questions about it.

Students are motivated and often ready to talk a lot after seeing *I Will Fight No More . . . Forever*. This excellent movie was created for television in 1977 to depict the historic struggle between the Nez Percé Indians and the U.S. Army in 1877. I start by asking students to list words in their journals describing General Howard, Captain Woods, and Chief Joseph. They then write two unsent letters from Captain Wood to Chief Joseph. The first is to have been written shortly after the Nez Percé surrender along the Canadian border in Montana. The second was to have been about two years later and to reflect the change in events, broken promises, and unanswered pleas. Captain Wood was the conscience of General Howard and the U.S. Army. His role was an interesting one, and by writing from his point of view students had to look at both sides of the issue. The Captain Wood assignment allows them to choose either the position of the U.S. or the position of the Indians, but they do have to make a choice.

After looking at the various treaties, Walla Walla and Medicine Creek in particular, students write a dialogue between General Stevens and the Indians for each site. As a follow-up activity, students take turns role-playing the drama. After writing the dialogues, they have definite ideas about the roles and are anxious to play them out. It is fun to see the shyness barriers come down as everyone gets involved in reenacting history. Dialogues not only involve students directly in history, they demonstrate whether students really understand what they study. Here, for example, is a dialogue a student wrote for a later unit when we studied the Pig War in the San Juan Islands. This was a controversy caused by an American farmer shooting a British farmer's pig on San Juan Island. Writing a dialogue allowed students to "step into" the moment of history we were studying, and it helped students develop an understanding of how the participants fit into the situation and how the controversy arose.

The Pig War

"Here's your pig Griffin! And if you don't keep you sheep off my land there'll be lots of mutton, besides pork. I've asked you before to keep your pig out of my potatoes, I just got tired of asking."

"You Americans are all 'alike.' You come barging around, acting like you own the place, build your shacks, plant your weeds, and then you don't even fence them properly! You should have kept your potatoes out of my pig! Now what do I do with my best breeder dead?! How will I replace him?!"

"Hold on now! I'll pay for your pig. Here's 10 dollars Griffin and be glad I'm paying you that much with all the damage he's done to my potatoes."

"Ten dollars!" choked Griffin. "Ten dollars; that pig was worth upwards of 100."

"Fine then, we're going to court."

"Fine, when do we go to England?"

"England! we're going to an American court. There's no way I'm going all the way to England."

Other Units

As this class moved into contemporary topics related to industry, foreign trade, and government, the journal writing continued. I had students write letters of application to industries to demonstrate their understanding of the nature of that business. Controversial issues like energy, and especially the Washington Public Power Supply System were natural topics for students to write letters of complaint or letters to the editor.

This discussion has focused on my Washington State History classes, but I use writing to learn in my U. S. History classes as well, and I believe these strategies can be adapted to any social studies class. No matter what the subject matter, writing improves students' ability to learn. Not only do students perform better on tests and write better final essays when we use writing to learn, they also contribute more to class discussions. I have noticed that students who are willing to read from their journals are not always the same ones who regularly participate in class discussions. Writing helps students develop ideas and deepen their understanding of history at the same time that it makes them more able and willing to communicate their learning to others.