NATIONAL WRITING DAY
21st June 2017

Writing Resources

for

Secondary Schools

Resources created in collaboration with National Writing Day partners from across the UK
INTRODUCTION: Dan Powell

Approaches to Teaching Creative Writing

Narrative Writing Starters....................................................................................................................... 4
Developing the Story................................................................................................................................. 4
Descriptive Writing.................................................................................................................................... 5
Group to Individual Writing..................................................................................................................... 5
Writing from Images.................................................................................................................................. 6

Workshop Plans

One-Breath Poem (All Ages)................................................................................................................... 8
Memory (KS3/4)......................................................................................................................................... 9
Response to Picture Stimulus (KS3/5)................................................................................................... 10
‘Please Can I Have…’ (KS4/5)................................................................................................................. 11
Response to Text (KS4/5)....................................................................................................................... 12
Non-verbal Storytelling (EAL students)............................................................................................... 14
The Object (KS3)...................................................................................................................................... 15

Other Workshop Ideas

Ice-breaker writing activities................................................................................................................... 17
Writing in a Group.................................................................................................................................... 18

Assembly Exercise

‘My Name Is…’ (All Ages)......................................................................................................................... 20
Introduction

The blank page can be daunting. As both a part-time teacher of English and a First Story writer-in-residence, my working life is spent encouraging young people to put pen to paper and write. As a working author, my writing life is spent encouraging myself to put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, and write. As a teacher, workshop leader and author, I am all too aware of how daunting the blank page can be.

The problem with the blank page is that it can be filled with anything. It can be filled with everything. Being left to grapple with this infinity of possibility can paralyse a writer, stop them in their tracks, leave them struggling to put words down, or, even when words do appear, they are too often deleted, erased, crossed out almost as soon as they appear. The blank page is daunting because it gives you nothing but space to hold on to. There is no easy to read route across the blank page. That’s what makes it a blank page. It hasn’t been written yet.

I am a believer in the power of the writing prompt. Writing exercises, writing prompts, make the blank page manageable. They give the blank boundaries. They give the blank page focus. They help lay a path through the empty space of the page along which each individual writer can craft unique detours.

Each of the National Writing Day activities and exercises included here is a brick upon a pathway designed to help young writers navigate the blank page. A host of ice-breakers and starters support any session leader looking to engage and enthuse their students, with activities ranging from word association games, to mini-autobiography, and beyond, to writing bad poetry or metaphorical pen portraits. A series of writing models from a variety of styles, give students quality texts to respond to, with writing prompts and activities developed to help facilitate enthusiastic and original responses. There are guides for the use of non-verbal storytelling and group writing that will engage a broad range of ages and abilities, as well as guides for the use of picture books and other images to promote creative writing, and a section of CPD materials to help the teacher/session leader develop engaging strategies and approaches for the teaching of narrative and descriptive writing within the classroom.

I hope these materials will inspire you and your students as we celebrate the first ever National Writing Day.

Dan Powell
for National Writing Day
Approaches to Teaching Creative Writing
Narrative Writing Starters

Anomaly game
Generate a list of people and places, the more unusual the better, then put them in bags labelled ‘people’ and ‘places’. Students select one person and one place at random from the bags. They must come up with a convincing story for why their character is there. Responses can be verbal or written. This starter can be supplemented with an additional bag of ‘dilemmas’ to help them build more developed stories.

Character-invention tasks
1. Each student in the group suggests one thing a character cannot be, with the group leader/teacher listing them on the board. Students must then write for five minutes describing a new character, but it cannot be any of the things listed.
2. Make an A-Z list of the characteristics of your character.

Extending the metaphor
‘My teacher is like an… eagle.’ Remove ‘like’.
Now think about what eagles (or whatever) do, and extend the metaphor.
‘My teacher is an eagle swooping round the room, hovering over his students, diving down on innocent prey and demolishing them with the terrible grip of his talons.’

Lying game
Give each student a misdemeanor and ask them to create an elaborate, far-fetched excuse for why they did it. Ask them to come up with a believable excuse. Discuss the difference between the two. What made the second excuse more believable? Discuss the importance of concrete detail and consistency in crafting believable narratives.

Six-word stories
Show students examples of this condensed form of storytelling, e.g. ‘No taxidermist loved his daughter more’; ‘For sale. Baby shoes. Never Worn.’ How many can you write in five minutes? Ten minutes?

Word bingo
Use a bank of words from a variety of word types (noun, verb, adjective). Give the group a word they must include in their first sentence of a story about anything they like. Then, from your list, call out one word every thirty seconds. You can increase or decrease the time between words to raise or lower the pressure on the students.

Writing race
List the things your character has in the fridge or the attic, or small items he/she owns, or expensive items, or things in his/her pockets – first person to fifty things for their character wins. Now write for ten minutes about this character. Include as many of the things from your list as you can.

Developing the Story

Building up
Write a three-sentence story. Beginning, middle and end. Now break each sentence into three more. Then break each new sentence into three more again. Keep doing this to build up the narrative.

Emotion game
Get the class to suggest a longlist of emotions, then come up with as many physical symptoms as they can for each emotion. Describing emotion through physical symptoms is always more powerful than just telling the reader how a character is feeling.
Write 100-word story/paragraph/pen portrait of someone undergoing an emotional event without referring to the emotion by name. To extend this, look at the varied ways to describe abstract emotions: idioms (‘heart was in my mouth’); colour (‘red-faced’), etc.
Narrative structure in flash fiction

Look at examples of flash fiction from writers like David Gaffney, Tania Hershman, Dan Rhodes. Identify the key narrative-structure elements: exposition; rising action; climax; falling action; resolution. Modelling structure in this way will help students to craft their own structured narratives – and for GCSE students, the flash-fiction form is akin in length to the narratives they will have time to write in exam conditions.

Descriptive Writing

Difficult description

On the board, get students to create a list of things that are difficult to describe, then select one and try to describe it. Or have them write one thing on a slip of paper, collect them in a hat, and then pull one out to write about.

Haiku

Always a solid exercise in creating short, powerful descriptions.

Sensory camera

Ask students to imagine a descriptive POV as that of a camera capable of ‘shooting’ all five senses. Start from the long view of the thing being described, then move in to more specific detail. Try to use all senses at each point. Use images and/or sound banks with this exercise to help bring the writing to life.

Sound banks

Find MP3 files of relevant sounds to play to the group. The White Noise app (multi-platform; www.tmsoft.com/white-noise) features a variety including storms, fire and the sea. Have the soundscape play and the students write in response to it. The work from this short-burst task can be returned to for ideas when embarking on writing more extended descriptive pieces.

Strange sensations

Try to describe smells and tastes without using words like sweet or sour. Force them to invent an original vocabulary for these senses (e.g. a ‘brownish, owly’ taste).

Group to Individual Writing

Shared writing is a great way to get students thinking creatively without the pressure of having to come up with a whole piece of work on their own.

‘Magic Box’

1. Read Kit Wright’s poem ‘The Magic Box’*
2. Now, write for five minutes a list of as many things as you can think of to put in your own box. Be imaginative and use the five senses; lots of description to really bring the items to life in a line. This is not polished writing but process writing, a list of possible ideas. After five minutes, ask each student to highlight or tick their two favourite
3. Go round the group, with each member reading their first choice; and back round again to hear their second – this group poem will be full of ideas and inventive use of language.
4. Now they are feeling more confident, give the group time to add to and rework their lists into their own ‘Magic Box’ poem. Encourage them to write about what their box looks like, feels like, just as Kit Wright does in the original poem. You can do this with autobiographical writing too.
5. Have the students read example ‘I Remember’ sentences (Joe Brainard’s book I Remember is a great source of these, though you need to select them carefully for the age group of your students as some have adult subject matter). Use the same process. They each read a sentence example, then spend five to ten minutes writing their own. Pick two and share as a whole class ‘I Remember’ poem. Then write more – extend their sentences into a paragraph or more – being descriptive, using the senses to bring the memory to life for the reader.

*You can find Kit Wright’s poem on http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/kit-wright-the-magic-box-poem-only/8837.html
Writing from Images

With the new English Language GCSEs requiring students to produce a piece of writing in response to a previously unseen image, all under exam conditions, developing skills and techniques for generating ideas rapidly to this kind of stimulus is vital. Many of the starter activities above will help foster confidence and creativity in your students.

Here are some approaches for further developing the skills required to succeed at this specific element of the exam. Try them out in your departments, then roll out those you find most helpful to your students.

Descriptive approaches:

1. **Zooming in’ technique: from large to small scale.** Start in the distance, with larger objects, then to the middle distance, and then to the foreground and smaller objects. Then reverse the process and ‘zoom out’.

2. **‘Zooming out’ technique: ask students to look for the smallest detail they can find in the image, describe it in detail, then pull out to the middle, describe that, then pull out again to take in the full landscape of the image.** This technique can be combined with ‘Zooming in’ to help craft a controlled structure for descriptive writing tasks.

3. **Look at the image and think of an abstract noun to describe the overall scene (perhaps an emotion: joy, happiness, loneliness; perhaps a state of being: pain, bravery, beauty; perhaps an idea: belief, trouble, friendship).** Now write a list of (mainly) concrete things associated with that abstract concept. Play the game ‘If you were a colour, shape, texture, place, sound, taste, item of clothing, anything…’ Students write a list and then they use the words/ideas in their description. This helps give the piece a sense of consistency, mood, and helps with originality of ideas.

4. **Use of ‘centre’, ‘edge’, ‘light’ sentence starters.** Give the students a series of prompts. What is at the centre of the image? (They write their response: ‘At the centre is…’) What is at the edge of the image? Start a sentence with: ‘The light…’ Start a sentence with: ‘In the shade…’ What is moving in the image? What is static in the image? What is the brightest colour in the image? Which is the dullest? What is the mood of the piece? The scope of the questions is limited only by your imagination and their relevance to the selected image the students are working from.

Creating a Narrative

1. Give students an image (or let them choose from a pile). Give them an image of a character, then ask them to start making notes. Who is he/she? What is he/she doing here? What has he/she done? What are they going to do? What do they want? Identifying what your protagonist wants is key to creating a narrative. Once you know what your protagonist wants, then someone or something can be the antagonist and try to stop them getting what they want. This is the basis of all conflict in narrative.

2. Questions: have students write for short bursts in response to questions about their image. Where is this place? Who cares for this place? What has happened just moments before this image was taken? If there is a figure in the image, why is he/she there? What has the figure in the image just done? What is the figure about to do? Why did he/she do it? What was trying to stop them? What will happen next? The responses to these questions (and any more like them that you choose to ask) should provide the students with ideas of character, plot and setting that they can use to craft their narrative.

3. The character has kept a secret for a long time. What is the secret? Why did it need to be kept secret?

4. Each student generates their own random list of words from newspapers or from a text you have been studying in class. Next, give them an image of a person and another of a place. Now they must combine these elements to create a story.
Workshop Plans
‘One-Breath Poem’ by Julia Bird, Creative Director of The Poetry School

Here’s a poem. It’s one of mine…

‘Poem to be Read on One Breath: Blue’

I am bathing my toddler nephew and doing so cautiously as there are so many ways to shop-soil someone else’s child in a setting such as this such as scalding or drowning or man o’ war attack but still we are having a useful chat about plastic seafood tub toys during which I say octopus and he says doctoper and I say octopus and he says octoper and I say octopus and I see the blue flash flash as the relevant neurone wriggles its tentacles into place and locks them down for ever

That toddler is eleven now, but that little moment of auntly adoration is one that has stayed with me.

I’ve written a number of these poems-to-be-read-on-one-breath. I like to compose poems within constraints, whether that’s within a traditional form like sonnets or haiku, or bounded by a set of rules that I’ve made up for myself.

These are the rules of the One-Breath Poem:

The length of the poem has to be no longer than you can read out loud all in one go. By the time you get to the last phrases, you should be running out of puff and delivering your message with breathy urgency. The capacity of your lungs will determine the length of your poem.

• You don’t need to worry about regular line lengths or repeating rhyme patterns – this is a very prosy poetic form.

• Keep punctuation to a minimum – you want a headlong rushing effect with no stops and starts.

• You need a key adjective in there, to give yourself the title. In this case it’s ‘blue’, but I’ve also written emerald, gold and pink poems-to-be-read-on-one-breath.

• The anecdote or feeling that you choose to write about needs to be factually true. Cast your mind back to the moments of high emotion in your life – what story or sensation do you wish to preserve?

• It needs to be in the present tense – the reader wants to be right there in the moment with you.

Inspired to write your own? Send the results to programme@poetryschool.com and we’ll put a selection up on the Poetry School blog to celebrate National Writing Day.

‘Poem to be Read on One Breath: Blue’ was originally published in Twenty-four Seven Blossom by Julia Bird (pub. Salt, 2013).

Contribution

We are grateful to Julia Bird and The Poetry School for contributing this resource to National Writing Day.
Memory (KS3/4)

**Aim:** encouraging students to use memory as a source of inspiration.

**Preparation:** photocopy some ‘I Remember’ pieces. There have been a number of spin-offs from the famous Joe Brainard autobiography. Wendy Cope* and Paul Farley, for example, are among those who contributed to an issue of Areté (aretemagazine.co.uk), which commissioned these pieces. An extract from Paul Farley’s ‘I Ran All the Way Home’ includes the lines:

I remember going for brawn, and the sign in Ernie the Butcher’s: A missing knife is a danger to all.

I remember a lad held a knife to my throat on the 73 for a laugh.

I remember one night in bed realising I was definitely going to die and wondering what nothing would feel like. This was around the same time as realising the universe went on for ever.

**Ice Breaker: Auto Writing (ten minutes)**

Ask students to write a diary entry. Stress that it will be private, and they won’t have to read it aloud if they don’t want to. Encourage them to write using emotions, describing how certain situations felt.

**Exercise One: ‘I Remember’ (twenty minutes)**

Give students Wendy Cope’s ‘I Remember’ pieces to read, or read them aloud to the students.

**Feedback (ten minutes):**

Have a brief discussion of which parts people liked best. Encourage students to think about reading as a writer.

**Exercise Two: Writing Memory (fifteen minutes)**

Ask students to write their own pieces, using the ‘I Remember’ format.

**Feedback (ten minutes):** ask each student to read some/all of what they have written.

**Additional Exercise: Animal Encounter (ten minutes)**

Ask students to close their eyes and think of an encounter with an animal. Think of it as the climax to a story. Think of all the details. Write about the encounter. Encourage dialogue and proper names.

**Feedback (ten minutes):**

Students read and critique. Pick up on successful details.

**Plenary (ten minutes):**

Encourage students to use their memories in writing and to value their experiences. Talk about how the students’ stories/memories – even ones that they might have thought were boring – are interesting on a human/cultural level to others.

*You can find Wendy Cope’s poem on https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/15/wendy-cope-recalls-childhood-memories

**Contribution**

We are grateful to Dan Powell for contributing to National Writing Day resources. Elements of ‘Approaches to Teaching Creative Writing’ are from Writing from Images (2016) by Dan Powell, with contribution from Anthony Cropper.
Response to Picture Stimulus (KS3-5)

Aim: this exercise can be useful preparation for the GCSE creative-writing exercise, in which students have to respond to an image with a piece of creative writing.

Preparatory Questions (ten to fifteen minutes):
- Give students an image (such as the boat, below) or let them choose from a pile.
- Imagine you are in the picture, to the right. Write down five things you can see/taste/touch/hear/smell.
- Before you arrived in the picture, something happened. What was it?
- There is another person in the picture just out of sight. Who are they? Give them a name.
- You hear a sound. Describe it.
- You have one thing in your pocket. What is it?
- The boat rocks from side to side as someone gets on. Who is it?
- After this picture was taken, something else happened. What was it?

Exercise (fifteen minutes): write a short story using the starting line: ‘It should’ve been simple.’ Try to include as many of the above details as possible.

Contribution
We are grateful to the National Association for Writers in Education for contributing this resource to National Writing Day.
Photo credit: http://www.ajlevy.co.uk
Please Can I Have…’ (KS4/5)

Part One (ten minutes):

Ask students to read Selima Hill’s ‘Please Can I Have a Man’ (available on the Poetry Archive website http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/please-can-i-have-man). Now play them Selima Hill’s reading on the Poetry archive.

The poem is packed with lavish description while at the same time the poet laments what she does not have. What is the effect of this mismatch? What does the use of the word ‘please’ add to the poem?

Ask students to think of something they want.

• It could be a person: a friend, a sibling.
• It could be companionship in the form of an animal: a domestic pet or something more exotic.
• It could be material: a home, a holiday, a coat.
• Or it could be a summer day, a new head of state, a sports team that wins.

Part Two (seven minutes):

Each student needs a pen and paper. Set an alarm for seven minutes’ time.

In the next seven minutes, ask them to make a list of as many attributes of the Thing You Want as they can.

In these seven minutes they must not stop writing. Keep writing the first things that come into the head, no matter how silly. This is not the poem. This is the raw material from which they are going to build the poem — so tell them not to worry about what they’re writing down, just keep it coming!

Tell students that if they get stuck, they should repeat the phrase ‘Please Can I Have a [Thing You Want]’ again and again until another thought pops into their head. Do not let the pen stop moving. Do not make corrections.

When the alarm sounds they may stop, but if they want to keep going you could allow them to do so until they run out of steam.

Part Three (ten minutes):

At this stage they should have a jumbled list describing the Thing You Want. On a new sheet of paper (or new Word document if you wish to move to a computer at this point) write their first line: ‘Please Can I Have a [Thing You Want]’.

Now use something from their messy list as the basis for the next line. Continue transferring the best elements of the messy list into their budding poem, making at least one improving alteration to each line.

As they build the poem, some tips you could offer:

Try including new ideas that were not part of your original brainstorm.

Try out your lines in a variety of orders.

Try a mix of longer and shorter descriptions.

When they’re happy with their poem, remind them to include the phrase ‘after Selima Hill’ under the title, and note that this is how poets acknowledge inspiration from other writers and it helps readers find more great poems.

Part Four (ten minutes):

Share the poems with the whole group or in pairs/smaller groups. Give students the opportunity to share their drafts as a class or with a neighbour. If a student is still writing allow them to do so until the end of the lesson.

Contribution

We are grateful to the Forward Arts Foundation for contributing this resource to National Writing Day.
Response to ‘Text’ by Imtiaz Dharker (KS4/5)

I am sending a message again. Maybe you can’t hear it through all the noise of lights and the dangerous way things move in that other city where I think you are, if I have the dates right, though of course I could be wrong.

If you expected the message, you would stand like this, with your eyes open and focussed on the screen, your ears closed.

The city I am in has lost its volume control. Every person in the place is tuned to maximum.

Can you see the text? Just to ask if you are safe and well?

A phone shrills, a clock explodes, in the next room, a TV switches on. Everywhere, the sound of sirens, drills. Cars screech, horns blare.

Where are you? Why have you stopped singing?

Imtiaz Dharker

From The Terrorist at My Table (Bloodaxe, 2006), by permission of the publisher for the Scottish Poetry Library

Opening up the poem

- Who might be the speaker of this poem?
- What clues does the poem offer about the speaker?
- To whom might the text be addressed?
- What clues does the poem offer about the relationship between the speaker and the person being addressed?
- In many ways, this poem is ambiguous (open to more than one interpretation; not having one obvious meaning).
- What is ambiguous in the poem? Why might Dharker have chosen to include such ambiguity? How is the ambiguity created?
- How important are the descriptions of the city in the poem?
- Which words or phrases are most memorable? Do any seem incongruous?
- How does the final word – ‘singing’ – affect your reading of the poem?
Research

• ‘The city I am in has lost / its volume control’ Research the issue of noise pollution. What are its effects on humans and wildlife?
• ‘I’m sending a message again’ Investigate the history of the text message. Conduct a survey of family and friends: how many use SMS text messages? What other methods of communication do they use?

Climbing inside the poem

• Experiment with volume when reading the poem aloud. Which lines of the poem should be shouted, which whispered?
• Debate: does modern telecommunication (smartphones, text messaging, Skype, social media etc.) bring us closer together, or create more distance between us?
• Many of Imtiaz Dharker’s collections contain her own drawings alongside her poems. Why not create an artwork inspired by this poem, or any of the other National Poetry Day in Scotland postcard poems?

Building on the poem (writing)

• Compose a poem in response to this one, writing from the perspective of the intended recipient.
• Close your eyes and listen to the sounds around you: what can you hear? Listen for background sounds that you might usually ignore. Try this in different places: at the bus-stop, in your bedroom, in the woods… Then write a poem about a place using only sounds to convey the landscape.
• “all the noise of lights” is an example of synaesthesia, a poetic technique in which one sense is described in terms of another. Make a list of concrete and abstract nouns, then describe them using synaesthesia: what colour is ambition? how does a beam of sunlight smell? what texture does a rainbow have? what sound do the rings on Saturn make? Use your best example(s) as the starting point for a poem.
• Create found poetry using your own text messages. Scroll back through your phone and use words and phrases from texts you have sent or received to create a new text. Start by copying out interesting or unusual phrases. Look for patterns: repetitions, rhymes, rhythms. Try putting incongruous words and phrases together to hear how they sound.
• Write a poem titled ‘The Sound of Silence’. You could use the absence of sound to tell a story, or build a poem around a sound-based oxymoron (contradiction) e.g. the unfamiliar sound of a door not being slammed; the booming echo of a silent yawn; the noisy chatter of glances and stares in the quiet carriage of a train…

Further reading and links to selected books by Imtiaz Dharker

• Purdah (Oxford University Press, 1989)
• Leaving Fingerprints (Bloodaxe Books, 2009)
• Postcards from God (Bloodaxe Books, 1997)
• I Speak for the Devil (Bloodaxe Books, 2001)
• The Terrorist At My Table (Bloodaxe Books UK, 2006)
• Over the Moon (Bloodaxe Books, 2014)
Non-Verbal Storytelling (EAL students)

**Aim**: to warm students up, allow them to get to know each other, start thinking about characters.

So much storytelling is non-verbal. Gestures and expressions are used around the world as an international language, meaning that even those with limited English-language skills can take part in this exercise.

**Introduction (teacher-led; ten minutes)**:

To introduce the idea of non-verbal communication, the teacher demonstrates a few simple actions for the students to identify, for example: kicking a football, scoring a goal, using a fishing rod, filling a trolley with shopping.

Next, move on to more subtle expressions that start to help you think about character-building. We are starting to get ‘under the skin’ of the characters we might want to include in our plot later. Ideas might include a bully, a clown, or somebody thinking.

**Main activity (pupil-led; twenty minutes)**:

Now it’s the students’ turn to come up with as many non-verbal impersonations as they can, in pairs or in small groups, for two or three minutes. This is fast, thinking-on-your-feet stuff. At the end of the three minutes, each group demonstrates their gestures to see how many everyone else can guess.

This final part can be lots of fun, but there’s usually also the starting point for a serious discussion about stereotyping, which can be very revealing when working with a group of children from diverse backgrounds.

Often, the people we choose to mimic as part of this exercise are based on stereotypes, because they are easy to identify and often quite funny. But, ask your students to think about why stereotypes might also be harmful. What are they based on? And how might they limit the characters we want to build in our story? Is anyone truly like their stereotype, or aren’t we all many-sided individuals with lots of different qualities? In order to build really original, authentic characters, and to avoid clichés, we need to avoid the stereotype.

Most characters in fiction have a little bit of some of the people the writer knows or has met at some point in their life. Discuss common human characteristics and personality traits. Use one from someone you know, share it with the students and then get them to work in pairs and find out a few characteristics that some of their friends/family have, then share them with the group. This is the starting point for great characters.

This exercise is drawn from a wider creative-writing toolkit for secondary-school teachers working with children for whom English is an additional language. The full toolkit, It’s Our Write, was developed by Richard O’Neill, at the end of a three-year residency at Babington Community College in Leicester.

**About Richard O’Neill**

Richard O’Neill was brought up in a large Romany family in the north of England. He is an award-winning storyteller, writer and workshop leader who tells stories in more than 100 schools each year.

This is the first of six exercises developed for the It’s Our Write toolkit. Further information can be found at http://www.writingeastmidlands.co.uk/services/its-our-write-toolkit/

**Contribution**

We are grateful for Writing East Midlands and Richard O’Neill for contributing this resource for National Writing Day.
Workshop Plans

The Object (KS3)

1. Brainstorm some objects that you remember from your childhood, or that have always been in your home, or are important to you in some way. For example:
   - Something important that someone gave you.
   - An object or piece of clothing that you associate strongly with someone in your family.
   - A gift from someone, or an object handed down from an older relative.
   - A piece of clothing or a pair of shoes that you associate strongly with a time in your life.
   - An object that expresses something important about you, e.g. a musical instrument, a treasured football shirt, a book you read as a child.

2. Choose one of the objects. Brainstorm what the object brings to mind. At this stage don’t censor your thoughts. Put down everything. Here’s one example:

3. Here a few ideas for more unusual ways of thinking about your object:
   - A highpoint or lowpoint in the object’s life.
   - A fragment or two of conversation that the object might have ‘overheard’ at key moments in its lifetime.
   - A memory of you or your parent/family member using the object.
   - What the object reminds you of.
   - Words to describe the object – what it looks like, sounds like, makes you feel or think.

4. Talk to someone else about your object, using your brainstormed ideas to help you. Ask them what stood out most about what you said. Which bits seemed most interesting and enjoyable?

5. Think about which of these ideas or angles might make a good starting point for writing about yourself or someone else, using the object as a way of focusing your ideas.

6. Try a few different starting points, as in this example about one special object, a charm bracelet:

   1. My mother gave me her gold charm bracelet, with its ballet shoe, its coffee pot, its fish and rabbit and tiny little doll. She gave it to me when I was very young, just a little girl, almost as if she wanted to be rid of it herself as quickly as she could.

   2. It was her first fiancé who gave my mother the charm bracelet. She was all set to marry him, till, at the very last moment, she ditched him. He had to sell up everything he’d bought for her, including her beautiful big house, that lay empty, waiting for them to move in. ‘Keep the charm bracelet,’ he’d said. ‘I can’t bear to have it back.’

   3. Once upon a time there was a beautiful young girl. She met a rich young prince who asked her to marry him and, of course, as all poor and beautiful girls do, she said yes. The only problem was, she didn’t marry him and it didn’t end happily ever after, because the beautiful young girl changed her mind.

7. Talk about what’s different about these starting points, which you like best and why. You could add a further dimension to this activity by asking students to write in the voice of the object – get the object to tell its story.

 contribution

We are grateful to the English and Media Centre for contributing this resource to National Writing Day.
Other Workshop Ideas
Ice-breaker Writing Activities

These short exercises may well lead to something productive that can be developed as a longer task.

Bad Valentine

Students create a list of clichéd objects they would expect to find in a Valentine’s card, e.g. roses, hearts, teddy bears, puppies. They then create a corresponding list of unusual and/or disgusting equivalents, e.g. nettles, intestines, pebbles, headless dolls, eels. Using their list, each student then writes the verse of a ‘bad’ Valentine card, e.g. ‘My feelings for you are like the sting of a nettle / I love you with all the force of my intestines.’

Coming Home

Think of ten things you experience with your five senses when coming home, e.g. ‘a green front door’, ‘the feel of the cold brass hook where I leave my keys’, or ‘the smell of onions frying’. Now write a poem about ‘Coming Home’ that is in second person and lists all the things you see, hear, smell, touch and taste when coming home. ‘You are the green front door, you are the cold brass of the hook where I leave my keys, you are the smell of onions frying’.

Deleted Words

Give students a poem/short piece of writing and cross out most of the words, only keeping the interesting nouns, strong adjectives and verbs. Write what remains as a poem/short story.

Family sayings

Ask students to share sayings that are common in their family. Think about idiosyncratic speech, dialects, and archaic and unusual phrases used by relatives, particularly old relatives. Use one of these as the start to a poem or story.

Forbidden Letter

Give students any topic, but tell them they may not use a particular letter in their writing.

I Am From...

Ask students to begin a sentence with these words, and encourage them to continue writing for at least ten minutes, jotting down whatever comes to mind (almost stream of consciousness). Encourage use of all senses.

Imaginary Source

Introduce a number of idiomatic expressions or unusual words such as ‘rule of thumb’ or ‘piece of cake’. You could use an online idiom list. Ask students to come up with reasons – as ridiculous as they like – why the phrases obtained their current meaning. They could then generate their own expressions and reasons behind them.

Incongruous Description

Ask students to generate a list of abstract nouns (concept may need explaining) and a list of concrete places, e.g. love, hate and jealousy, and bathroom, hospital and bookshop. Now place two together to get incongruous pairings, e.g. ‘the bathroom of jealousy’, and ask them to write a piece about/containing the expression.

Me(taphor)

Ask the students to create a piece where they compare every part of their body to something concrete, but instead of saying ‘is like’ they should just say it is that thing. They should start with their hair and work their way down to their toes, e.g. ‘My hair is the sky, my nose is a mountain.’

Short Autobiography

Ask students to write a brief autobiography (five to seven minutes). It should include seven facts, one of which is made up. Ask students to read the pieces aloud – the others should guess which is false.

Thank you

Ask students to write a thank you to something we don’t usually thank (e.g. a telephone, sheet, shower). Students should not name the object, so others can guess once each piece has been read out.
Writing in a Group

Collaborative Story

Use a map or diagram of a communal area (e.g. block of flats or shopping centre). Each student is allocated a space within that area. They create a character that inhabits the space (e.g. Ayesha runs the nail bar on Level 2), developing a backstory and as much information about their character as possible (this can lead to separate activities; for example, students could interview each other about their respective character).

When the characters are ready, introduce an inciting incident. Students develop a reaction to the inciting incident (the event that moves the story from exposition and into the first of the series of rising action events) from their characters. What follows needs careful management and editing, but each student takes responsibility for their character in the story that ensues.

A group might begin by discussing the inciting incident, what they have seen, what to do next. The story can take on a classical structure, with the group deciding on what their characters where doing at the status quo at the opening of the story (exposition), before considering the multiple steps of rising action and what their characters did in response to these events. Once the group has decided what the climax of the story is, they must each then decide how their character responds to it. They can use any or all of their writing about their characters to help them with ‘filling in the gaps’ of the story.

An Exquisite Corpse

Essentially, this is a game of Consequences.

Give the students a subject (e.g. ‘being in the city’ or ‘spending time with your friends’). One student writes a line on a piece of paper and folds it over and passes it to the next student, and so on round the class. Read the results. This could lead to a longer piece of writing. (See ‘The Crow’ in Chandenance, ‘PS’ in Crumbs on a Page and ‘One Day’ in And So It Begins).

Variations: Give students rules/formulae for each sentence, e.g. they can only use four-letter words; no use of the letter ‘e’; no use of the noun ‘to be’ or its derivations; address every sentence to ‘You’. The variations are endless!

Free Writing to Music

Find three jazz (or other genre!) tracks, each with a distinct beginning, middle and end. Get students to listen then write a story following the arc of the music.

Poetry Machine

Discuss the difference between abstract and concrete nouns. Ask students to write down four concrete nouns and four abstract nouns on pieces of card. Then ask them to write the definitions of these nouns on different-coloured pieces of card. Shuffle all the definitions together and, separately, shuffle the nouns together. Give the nouns to one student and the definitions to another. Ask for a noun to be read aloud followed by a random definition. They will see that some produce poetic definitions and some don’t. You can ‘catch’ the poem by writing down the ones the students tell you to, the ones they think ‘work’ as surreal metaphors.
Assembly Exercise
Assembly Exercise

‘My Name is…’ Assembly Plan (For All Ages)

1. **Aim:** A quick writing exercise to get students’ pens moving

2. **Preparation:** Ask all students to bring a pen and paper to assembly.

3. **Warm up:** Ask students to try and do a synchronised clap. They won’t manage it first time! Lead them with one big clap above your head. Keep trying this and asking them to do it with you until they are all in sync.

4. **Exercise:** Ask students to write down ‘My name is…’ then their first name and surname’ at the start of their first line.

Then ask them to think about what their name means to them and tell its story. Prompts:

- Why did you get given that name?
- What does it mean?
- Do you like your name?
- Do you wish you were called something else?
- What do you feel when people call your name?
- What does your name sound like?
- If your name was an animal, what animal would it be?

Give them 5 minutes to write down whatever comes into their minds.

Ask them to round off with ‘My name is…’ their name again at the end of the piece.

5. **Presentation:** Allow 10 minutes for students to stand up and read their work to the assembly.

---

My name is Noga. It means Venus, the star you can always see in the evening, the second-brightest light in the sky. My parents thought to call me Lila, meaning night; a night time child, I ended up as the goddess of love and beauty. Not unusual; I know seventeen others with my name.

But I prefer it, prefer that uniformity that comes with it, the immediate acceptance: no strange looks or unnerved smiles. I am the same as everyone else and that is why it was chosen.

To fit in but fit out. My name is Noga.

Noga Levy-Raporport