

WRITING THROUGH THE SENSES

These lessons address some of the significant problems that make writing difficult for many students. One of the most important is psychological, but frequently skills-based. If the students are not comfortable with writing, even when the topic involves their lives directly, they write as little as they believe they can get away with and say they're finished. This is even the case sometimes with students who think of themselves as poets. They may not feel physically comfortable or capable of writing or they may have had a history of negative educational experiences with writing. Another significant problem many students in Special Ed, and many others too, have is that they do not easily make connections or draw conclusions.

The purpose of this series of lessons is to encourage the students to explore their ideas with more depth, to have them draw connections, and to have them see their ideas on paper. For this reason, if a particular student has very low level writing skills, it makes sense to start that student off with an aide who can write the initial ideas, maybe up through the second essay, down for him or her. Recording brainstorming is frustrating for students who have very low level writing skills. Even if they write as many letters as they can so they can identify the word later, they frequently cannot remember what they were thinking. That said, let's look at each part of the lesson and consider its application.

Brainstorming: When we have students do a brainstorming activity for the first time, it has to be an eye-opening occasion for them. It's best to do a full class brainstorming first so they really understand that you write down every idea anyone has. In the first couple of days, if you have time, do a brainstorm with a simple word like "window." Ask them to say everything they think of when they hear the word 'window' and write everything you hear on the board. After they've said between 5 and ten things, they normally feel they've exhausted the activity and are ready to quit. At this point, draw a small mark on the board at that point and continue to probe with questions. Once they start to answer the questions, they begin to get carried away by the activity and call out more and more words. Some students will check other students' answers and say no, but make a point of putting everything on the board. Explain that later you'll decide what we can and cannot use, but now just write everything down. Stop only when no more words fit on the board. The, point out to them the initial marker after word 6, when they had said they were finished. By the end they have 75 words or more. THAT is brainstorming. You can brainstorm words, ideas, anything you can think or imagine. Tell them that is how they should start their writing endeavors.

Organizing: This is at least as difficult for many students, moreso for some. Students in Special Ed, and more and more students in regular ed are getting into high school completely incapable of making connections. The sense of cause and effect is something we have to teach them before we can move on. But it starts at an even more basic level. Have the students look at the huge list they've just compiled and try to organize it. You first have to get a sense if they even know what you mean. Would you, for example, put automatic and stained glass together for any reason? Probably no, so those two wouldn't be together once it's organized. (If one student says he would and can explain how or why, let him put them together; that's why we all write different essays and have our own thoughts and ideas.) What does stained glass tell you about a window? What does automatic tell you? By asking questions,



try to help the students through the organization phase. At the end, they may have some words left over that they won't use at all. Fine. They may also have seen some connections that they weren't even thinking about as they were doing the brainstorming. That's the fun part. Once it's all organized, work together to give it an outline form. Imagine you're going to write an essay about windows. What are you going to write about? What's your thesis. You don't have to go so far as to have them write an essay about windows because you want them to have positive, interesting experiences with writing....but talk about the outline in terms of the structure of the house, or whatever image you use. Go over the five-paragraph structure with them: theses, introductions, topic sentences, supporting ideas, and conclusions.

Writing: If they've done a good brainstorming and organizing, they've already done a good bit of the work. Now, they take their outlines, personalize them, and turn them into essays. Before you do this, you may want to hand out the editing skills so they are considering the grammar points as they write.

Normally, they would go into editing and revising next. For the Writing through the Senses lessons, though, they'll just spend one class period getting their ideas down on paper and working with classmates to ensure that their ideas are clear.

