

GREAT TEACHING IDEA  
BASED ON "POWER WRITING THROUGH POETRY"

I always begin my Poet-in-Residence visits to grades K-12 by sharing "Five Steps to More Powerful Writing. They are:

- 1) Focus!
- 2) Zoom in for the close-up shot.
- 3) Show it, don't tell it. (I write this a second time to help all understand what we mean by it. 2nd version: sHOW, don't tease. HOW is something awesome? Beautiful? Exciting? A 3rd grader at Sandston Elementary, Henrico County, came up with the word "tease" instead of "tell." "Ms. J.," she said, "words like "awesome," or "beautiful" are just *teaser* words, aren't they?"  
  
"Exactly!" I answered, delighted. Those blurry adjectives are like saying I've got something awesome in my pocket, but nyah-nyah-nyah, I'm not gonna' tell you any more than that."
- 4) "Find descriptive, specific VERBS and NOUNS. Find ones that incorporate the adjectives and adverbs, so that you can whittle down your writing experience. "Poetry is experience distilled," is another quote I share. It is the best words (and fewest) words in the best order," Wordsworth reminded us.
- 5) Nurture your writing. (I substitute "nurture" for "rewrite" and "revise," which students don't like to do. "Nurture" connotes patience and tender, loving care. First, you seed the idea, the image, the phrase. Next, you feed it details, verbs, nouns to bring it into FOCUS. Then, you weed it of extra words and phrases that are choking out the strength and power of your writing.

I then provide all my K-12 students with the statement: "The sunset is awesome," explaining that the statement only tells/teases. I ask students to imagine saying this sentence to their great granny in the nursing home. She can't remember sunsets. She can't see anymore. Will that help her experience a sunset you saw? No!!! That's just teasing.

We go to SHOW TIME. HOW is the sunset awesome? We view pictures, postcard, photographs of sunsets in all their glory. We list colors, shapes, nouns and what those nouns are DOING. We don't do the webbing, clustering thing. I like to list words in columns. That's easier, I think, for students to pick them out and then mix and match those words.

Here's the pre-writing we did in 4th and 7th grade classrooms in Richmond, Virginia.

Exercise: THE SUNSET IS AWESOME - Show, don't tell. HOW is it awesome? Give proof/evidence. Help Great-

Granny experience it through your specific details. Build your word bank in your pre-writing. Think of all the words

you can. Then go to the Thesaurus and find more.

COLORS/ADJECTIVES

red, orange, yellow, gray  
blue, white, crimson, purple,  
pink, shimmering, glistening,  
blazing, gleaming, glowing, etc.

#### SHAPES/NOUNS

puffs, wisps, strokes, pools, streaks, ripples,  
a river, waves, fire, flames, embers, coals,  
sparks, flares, ribbons, streams, banners,  
plumes, coils, curves, sweeps, plumes,  
feathers, brush, trickle, shimmer, islands,  
a quilt, peaks, etc.

#### VERBS

flashes, bursts, gleams, shimmers, dances,  
curls, coils, loops, trickles, waves, foams,  
froths, ripples, rushes, puffs, wisps, and many  
of the nouns, etc. (Mix and match)

Students see how many of the verbs and nouns are interchangeable.

I shared with participants in my session this exercise which we did in a fourth grade class at Overby-Sheppard School

in a Richmond city school. Mrs. Laretta Coleman, the teacher, was thrilled. She said her student got confused,

many times, by the webbing/clustering. After they would get the words into the webs, they'd be stuck. "This way," she

said, "it's clear to them how to pull the words out, then "rub them together to make sparks," as Sandburg used to

describe what poets do.

Mrs. Coleman produced this:

" Sliver of gold curves around the blue,  
and then, there gleams a flash of shimmering light  
which ripples and flows and bursts  
into a waterfall of silver, crimson, and blue."

Another word-picture from a fourth-grader, who surprised himself:

"The sunset looked like ribbons stretched across the sky  
with curls and curves gleaming over the river."

Another:

"The sunset streams across the sky  
like waves ripping,  
or red ribbons curling and puffing."

In a 7th grade class in Wilder Middle School, Henrico County, a student wrote:

"The sky blazes and wisps of waves of heat ripple,  
as clouds rampage like bulls across the sky."

Another student wrote:

"The sky looked like it was on fire with flames creep-walking across the world,  
orange-red blazes bursting, flickering,  
glowing into embers, dying into dead, dark coals."

Another SHOW TIME sunset description shared with participants:

"Great Granny, the sky was on fire!  
It looked like flames doing the Jamaican heel-toe,  
while orange blazes raced in violent waves.

Participants wrote "The sunset is awesome" descriptions, using the words in the word-banks as a potter uses

clay, a carpenter uses boards and nails, a builder uses bricks and mortar.

Here is one of the anonymous products of that exercise:

"Gleam of orange, wink of red  
before the trickle of purple slides down the horizon,  
giving way to the pliable gray, submerging into  
polished black - Nightfall.

And another by a participant:

"Diluting like a funnel downward toward the sea with  
a rainbow of gold and yellow, the sun  
met the ground with a kiss.  
Cynthia Richardson

Try this in your classrooms. It really works. It gives a student a sense of power. I call it a "slam dunk" when he/she is able to create an experience with words. You can do it with bubbles, with a little wind, with an autumn leaf, a snowflake, a raindrop. with almost anything. Just start with: "The bubble is a happy, dancing bubble," or "A breeze is mischievous," or "A whirling, swirling snowflake on your street," etc.

Good luck! Have fun!

With love, Ms. J.