

How to Write a Play or Musical with your Class

Theme

Depending on the goals of the class/project, this is an opportunity to either connect writing to other elements students are learning or simply pick something fun and focus more on developing students' writing.

Theme topics should be broad so that students have a wealth of ideas to draw from.

Theme suggestions:

- Dreams
- Emotions
- Geography
- The World Around Me
- The Future
- Secrets
- The environment
- My neighborhood
- Culture
- Work and play
- Hobbies
- Family
- Growing up
- School
- History
- Regions
- Science
- Wisconsin
- Native Americans
- Ancient Civilizations
- Countries
- Fairytales
- Books
- Seasons
- Heroes and History
- Heritage

Intro of the Project (5 minutes)

We are creating a show composed of writing by students, including the students in this class. The students' goal in the writing workshops should be to write something that could be acted out or sung. Some writing will become the lyrics to songs. A composer will select writing to be set to music. Writing will be performed uncorrected. Students writing will be collected at the end of each of the two sessions.

Brainstorming (10-15 minutes)

- Define and evaluate the theme
- Use a blackboard and free associate! Everybody contributes something.
- Try to hit on as many different interpretations/definitions of the word as possible.
- Depending on the topic sometimes prompts might help, Ex: “Dreams” theme, read part of MLK’s speech, or the lyrics to a song about dreams, Langston Hughes poem etc.
- The following are examples of questions to discuss to prod brainstorming/writing ideas about “Geography” as a theme:
 - terrain
 - food
 - shelter
 - weather
 - clothing
 - plants and animals
 - language and dialect of different cultures
 - customs
 - culture
 - beliefs
 - industries and goods produced
 - travel
 - leisure activities
 - Culture is “the customs and arts of a nation or people.” Can you create a place with its own unique customs and language? What does it mean to have different “cultures?” How might those differences affect the way people behave?
 - Consider climate- What are some different climates around the world? How could climate play a role in your story or poem?
 - Where you live can affect the type of natural disasters that occur- droughts, hurricanes, earthquakes etc. Imagine what it might be like being in the middle of a hurricane or other natural disaster. What might the climate be on another planet or in a place you invent?
 - What are some different types of food from around the world? Are there any foods that you eat that come from other countries? Is there a story behind any special foods you eat at home?
 - Consider the geography of your neighborhood or Milwaukee or Wisconsin.
 - What are different types of clothing that you might find around the world? How might they dress differently in Alaska, or Japan or Nigeria? Imagine what you might have to wear, or what might be considered fashionable on a planet in a galaxy far, far away.

Creative Writing

Cover basic ideas about writing:

- stories should have a beginning/middle/end
- not literal, idea or image over linear

- make it up- it should be original ideas
- exaggerate
- make interesting choices/make something unusual happen
- word power (sound, rhyme, rhythm, the impact of words at music)
- write using descriptive words, use of simile and metaphors.
- Describe different things using the five senses.
- Give examples and have students come up with interesting descriptions of ordinary objects around the classroom.
- Pick an object and through various questions have the students come up with a story about it.
- Consider the emotional element-how does the character feel inside? Use “The magic If” - **If** I were this character, what would I do? What would I see, hear, taste, smell, touch and how would it make me feel? Seeing things through a characters point of view will enrich your writing.
- Encourage them to try writing poetry with the following in mind:
 - Poetry does not have to rhyme, or even be complete sentences.
 - Use simple clear descriptions that give a snapshot of what you are describing or talking about.
 - Think about songs you know and how they use rhythm and repetition for emphasis.
 - Avoid telling a word for word story, instead, be concise, giving the reader just enough information to solidify the ideas and images you want to create.

Theatre Activities (5-10 minutes)

Goals: To stimulate imagination, give writers images and ideas for writing, to connect writers with their bodies and senses, get them out of their heads.

Rules:

- Hands to yourself. Work alone.
- Listen. Listen to instructions and don't talk about what you're doing. (At the beginning of the exercises establish a phrase/visual that students will freeze to when they need to listen for new directions (repeating a clapping pattern, replicating a thumb up in the air etc)).
- Appropriate indoor behavior-stay off the furniture, stay in the room, no imaginary guns, control yourself.
- Keep in mind the theatre activities are meant to inspire writing ideas.
- When it's time to write, you must write something. Write anything, just write.

Physical Warm Up activities:

- Stretch and Shrink- Have students make themselves as tall as possible and to the count of 10 must make themselves as small as possible. Be ridiculous, tell them to open/close their eyes, ears, nose and toes. Make sure students are listening to the counts so that their movement/change in shape mirrors how close they are to 10 (basically you don't want them to drop to the floor by the time you make it to three).

- Have students use their bodies to create the first letter of their name.
- Have students loosen up their bodies by doing simple shoulder and head rolls, rotating arms, bend over to touch their toes etc.

Vocal warm ups activities:

- Students stand in a circle count off by numbers and each student must be slightly louder than the person before them. The first person is the quietest and the last the loudest.
- Have students repeat back various sounds rhythms with their voices.

Character Exercises:

These can be done as a group/individually depending on the class.

- Building on stretch/shrink, tell students to stretch and build a character as you open up. Think about who and where the character is; give your character something to do. Tell the students, “When the signal is given, behave as your character.” With another signal, they freeze. Instruct them to consider what their character will do next, and how the action they are performing will end. On a series of signals, the students will perform the sequence then freeze on the signal. Shrink to a count of ten. On a new count, make a new character or change the circumstances for the same character. Relax. Discuss some of the ideas/reactions etc. Each participate tells the group one of their characters.
- Call out different characters, emotions, identifying ideas that students can walk around the room and act out, and relate ideas from the brainstorming to the exercise. Ex: Topic is emotions: Call out different situations for students to react to “You’ve just one a million dollars”, “You have just lost your favorite ___”, “Ahead of you is something scary, what is it and react to it”

Index Cards

- Ahead of time write on note cards different characters/ideas for kids to act out. Ex: Topic is Geography: Various card ideas “Hurricane, Hawaii, Farm, Mountain” Give students a few minutes to look at their card and practice on their own, then have them stand in a circle and have volunteers act out what was on their card and have the other students guess what was on their card.

Valuable Object

- Have students think up a character/situation and then find an imaginary object that their character would want and have them use the object. After a few minutes tell them the object got 10 times bigger/smaller and they must use this object, change the size a few times, then have them trade objects with someone else.

The theatre activity should be followed up with discussion about what ideas/characters students created. Encourage them to borrow/use each other’s ideas as well.

Also consider actors learn to develop a character by considering the following criteria

- Given circumstances (Who are you-age, physical attributes; where are you, when is it-time of day, season, year)
- Analogous experience (A comparable experience in your own life)
- Magic If (what would I do IF I was this character)
- Objective (What does the character want? Why is the character doing what they're doing. Turn this into an infinitive verb, such as To escape; To convince; To amuse)
- Action (what does the character do to achieve their goal? Yell, beg, flirt, etc)

Other exercises that can be used to prompt thinking about creative writing can be:

Pictures, photos and paintings

- Play music or show pictures that reflect the theme and have students write reactions to the pictures, specifically focusing on who/what/when/where/why/how in creating a story of some sort.

Tableaux

- Create a tableaux of the pictures- pick a painting/picture that seems to create a situation that could be expanded on for a story. Have students recreate the picture using their bodies, then have them come up with the story surrounding the picture. Is the picture the end product of the story? The beginning? The middle? Have students write out the story, then as a class write out the script and perform the story. Or create several other frozen pictures that communicate the story they have created.

Music

- Listen to a piece of music (it doesn't have to be long) with very specific rising/falling/climactic points. Play the piece several times and have students write a story that reflects the piece. Have students get into groups and create a "silent movie" or "silent play" that uses the music to show the action of the piece. Have students write out the script using only movement to tell the story then have them perform for the class. After they have performed, have the class tell the story of what they saw. (once again this doesn't need to be long)

Write

Instructions:

- Write anything, just write.
- Write down what you were acting or develop a new idea.
- Remember you want to write something that could be performed.
- Keep it simple.
- Longer is not better. Free associate. Use the brainstorming list on the board.
- Describe it. Use your senses in your writing. Give it an ending, a shape, an arc.
- Encourage students to write freely about the topic without worrying about grammar/spelling/punctuation/length/print/cursive
- Tell them to write anything about the topic including poetry, rap, story, dialogue, rewrite lyrics to the tune of a familiar song

- Remind them they are writing with the idea of performance in mind
- Remind them ideas/writing MUST be their own.

Choosing a piece to perform

- Look for pieces of writing that have action words in them, or that can involve many students.
- Pieces should have a beginning, middle and an end.
- Look for interesting characters and events.
- Look for pieces with humor.
- If you find a piece that may be lacking in certain qualities, this may be a great time to edit and work on a piece as a group, either through discussion, or through improvisation (ex: what could happen next in this piece).
- Many times the best pieces of writing on paper don't translate well to pieces being staged.
- Consider inanimate objects and animals as characters as well.

Staging a Piece of Writing

- Read through the piece as a class and make sure any edits that are made can be made as a class. Sometimes this may mean that more dialogue/voices are given to characters.
- Also something to consider and discuss in class is editing. Many times when writing a first draft writing has many grammatical/spelling errors. By reading student pieces aloud, this may help students to find errors they may not have seen when just reading it silently.
- Consider using Narrators if necessary.

How to begin

- Have the student read their raw writing out loud.
- Type up the student writing so that it is legible for everyone.
- Begin by reading through the piece and writing a list of all the characters, and a separate list of events involved on the board.
- Write down any other needs, props, sound effects etc.
- Assign parts to all students, if there are not characters that are specifically mentioned look for other ways to introduce non-speaking characters/add dialogue (also consider important information mentioned in the story that are not necessarily animated characters i.e. trees/stars etc. but that can easily become a character with voice etc.)
- In cases of narration, characters etc. that are being discussed/things that are happening should be acted out.
- Break down each piece of the action and have students involved in each part practice saying their lines, getting into place and reacting as needed according to the script.

The following are examples of pieces of writing that could be acted out. The first is a very short simple piece of writing that allows for a lot of action. The second piece is a group poem that can be staged by having students say lines together or by having one person say the line the others act it out, amongst many other variations.

“Fear” by Christopher Robers, Roosevelt- 6th grade

Scared
Alone
Crying for help
Run
And leave it behind
Get it away
And make
Me
Brave

“Geography is...” by Meir, Roosevelt, Fritsche, from KidsWrites “Geography”

geography is places in the world
everwere we walk
geography is travel
the places you want to go
the world and the food
Geography is safari adventures
maps and homework
not good
Geography is study of the dirt
Geography is something that most people deal with everyday.
a nine letter word
geography is big mountains and small caves
It's rainforests and more!
people and places
different cultures
Geography is chicken all around the world
worldly adventures
it is about everything and everybody
And it is boring and lots of pepel don't like it
Geography means that guy from the Skylight makes me write about it.
fellings
like a confusing book
a hard thing to learn
the more places in the world the more places you have to shop
the whole, wide world, good, evil...wow
too much work
Geography is stuff I don't know
nobody knows
What teachers make us learn every single year
boring
but important

everything
a map
a globe
a flower
a grave
zebras
tamarin monkeys
chicken
a world of wonders
geography is me.