



STUDY GUIDE For Pre-Performance & Post-Performance Activities

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Introduction

This Study Guide has two sections that reflect the two basic components of my performance:

Section 1: Getting a Story Idea - I explain various ways story ideas are found and illustrate each with a story I have written.

Section 2: Bringing a Story to life - I bring my original stories and my versions of traditional stories to life in dramatic performance.

There are many activities that can be done in the classroom or as homework both before and after my performance. These activities will reinforce many of the goals for English Language Arts and Creative Expression. They are also fun to do. The list that follows is by no means exhaustive and can certainly be supplemented with your own creativity.

*Genius is 1% inspiration
and 99% perspiration*

Remind your students of what Thomas Edison once said: *Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration*. This is true for all creativity. The only way to discover the depths of a story idea is to write and rewrite. A good idea is to look at the story from different points of view. For an interesting exercise, have the class come up with a common story idea and then have each student create her or his own version of it.

Section 1: Getting a Story Idea

Understanding the Parts of a Story

In my performance I outline one way to look at the parts of a story. I make it clear to the students that their teachers may describe a story in different ways and that my way should not be considered better than theirs. It is, however, one that I have found useful.

I have found that one way to look at a story is to see it as

Characters...

Described by Qualities...

placed in a *Situation...*

in which *Something Happens.*

Students can begin creating a story by making up one or more *characters*, giving those characters *qualities*, placing them into a *situation* and then making *something happen*. Try letting students identify these parts in stories that they are familiar with and then let them create a new story by changing the qualities or the situation or what happens.

Qualities are the things that describe a *character* and differentiate one character from another such as shape, color, voice, emotion, movement, past experience, desires etc. I explain that we can look for outside qualities by observing how the character looks or moves or speaks and look for inside qualities by understanding how the character feels inside. Very often we learn about these qualities by what the character does.

Three great ways to develop story ideas that I talk about are 1) paying attention to the world around you; 2) drawing inspiration from other stories; and 3) writing about yourself.

Paying Attention

Students should be encouraged to pay attention to everything around them. They should pay attention to the things people say and do and also to the objects in their lives. They should begin to look at the world around them as a source of story ideas. These story ideas can center around events and objects as they appear to be and also as they might be.

Examples:

1. Write down all the events surrounding your average morning—from waking up to arriving in the classroom. If possible, list the events as they happen. Pay close attention to colors, sounds, and aromas. Don't dismiss trivial everyday routines like brushing your teeth or the things you do when you get dressed. If you are describing your morning journey to school, just jot down brief outline notes as the events occur and

then flesh out your description when you get to class. (Younger students may have to rely on memory and relate the events orally.)

2. Ask older family members or friends questions about their lives. *Paying attention* to people we see everyday is not only a good way to develop empathy and understanding, but also can uncover a treasure trove of story ideas.
3. Look at something around and imagine what else it might be. You are sitting in class writing notes with your pencil. What if that pencil were not a pencil, however, but instead a "Transforming Beamarong" accidentally fallen to Earth from a visiting interstellar spacecraft. Perhaps when you turn it in a certain direction your thoughts at that moment become reality for fifteen minutes.

Drawing from Other Stories

Getting story ideas from other stories is a long-standing tradition practiced by the greatest writers and storytellers in the world. In my performance I explain that copying a story word for word and calling it your own is not a good thing to do. You can, however, get inspiration from other stories. You can get ideas from other stories and even tell your own version of other stories. This is an excellent way to encourage reading, writing and multicultural understanding.

Explaining The World

A great genre of stories are those that *explain the world*. A fine example is Rudyard Kipling's "How the Leopard Got His Spots." Writing an Explain-the-World story requires both *paying attention* and *drawing from other stories*. Students can first go to the library to see how mythology and folktales in the pre-scientific world offered explanations about everything from why the sun crosses the sky every day to how the buzzard lost his hair. After familiarizing themselves with this story theme, students can look around and find something to explain. It can be based on a scientific explanation, but they must turn the elements of the explanation into characters as I do in "How Salt Came to Live in the Sea."

You might take your students to the folktale section of the library to find a folktale that appeals to them. The students could then use elements of this folktale to create a different story, or they may simply tell this story in their own way. They could, for example, tell the tale as if it took place in today's world—the world they are familiar with. Hollywood does this all the time.

Writing about Yourself

Some of the most compelling stories come from the author's own life. Keeping a journal is a great beginning. The best journal is a private one. Perhaps everyone could be assigned to

keep a journal and then to write a story based on a journal entry. Students should be encouraged to write an entry each day even if it is only a sentence or two. A dream journal is also a good source for story ideas. Also try keeping a class journal with a different student writing each day's entry.

Of course, students often do not want to talk about personal events in their lives. They can always use their imagination to change the story. Don't insist that they reveal which parts are real unless they wish to. Here are three ways to use one's own life in story writing:

Exaggeration First the student should describe an actual ordinary event such as waking up in the morning or going to school. Then the student could write about that same event and change it, making something frightening, mysterious, ridiculous or romantic happen.

Extrapolation Let the student describe an emotion he or she has actually felt. Give it to a character creating a fictional situation in which such an emotion might be found. Everyone experiences times when they feel alone and left out, when they are happy, sad, proud, frightened, jealous or angry. Encourage the students to remember these emotions, to describe them in their journals while they are feeling them and then to use these real descriptions to inspire story ideas.

The Simple Truth Though sometimes difficult at first, encourage students to write about actual events in their lives. A description of a simple and uneventful family meal can be a great writing exercise.

Section 2: Bringing a Story to life.

My program is designed to bring out the importance of the performance of a story. Too often children have only a passive relationship to the presentation of stories from television or movies. They don't understand what they can bring to a story in their own performance of it. I strongly urge dramatic readings in the classroom of both original and traditional stories and poems. I believe my performance offers a strong inspiration for such a project. It is not necessary to memorize, but the student should be familiar with the work and rehearse it before the actual class performance. Allow this activity to be fun and not intimidating or difficult.

When preparing a story for performance, give imagination full sway. Parts of the story could be in song or rhythmic verse. The story may be told by a third person narrator or by one of the characters. Experiment both with stories told by one person and stories told or performed by a group of students.

Conclusion

The exercises in this Study Guide are a great way to get students' creativity flowing and to get them thinking about what goes into writing and telling a story. Creative exercises like these are a good first step to understanding literature, writing fiction or non-fiction, and presenting one's point of view in any medium.