

### **Sample Gateway Activity for Personal Narrative Using Sensory Details to Evoke Emotion**

**Assignment:** Write a personal narrative about an important incident that occurred during your childhood and that helped make you the person you are today. In telling your story, include as much sensory detail as possible about the incident, so your reader can share in the experience.

#### Goals for the activity:

**Long-term goal connected to writing assignment:** Students will learn how to generate sensory details about a particular incident and integrate these into a personal narrative.

Short terms goals for the activity:

Students will learn the concept of sensory imagery and how images can convey feelings or moods.

Students will learn to identify sensory images in a poem and to use these images in developing an interpretation of a poem.

#### Content to be taught:

I have chosen to focus on helping students understand how sensory images can evoke abstract emotions in readers. Part of understanding literature, especially poetry, involves understanding how authors use imagery, and sensory detail in particular, to communicate mood or feeling. Mary Oliver (1994) defines imagery as “the representation of one thing by another thing” (p. 92). Nims (1974) comments, “ We can think of images as differing from ideas or thoughts in that images are always made up of sense data: they deal in such impressions as color or sound or taste or smell or temperature...”( p. 3).

While this is an important strategy for reading literature, it is also a very important concept for writers to learn. I will use this lesson to begin the process of helping students develop their powers as writers by getting them to generate sensory details about a particular incident and then to integrate those details into their narratives.

#### Description of Gateway activity:

##### **Initial Experience**

As students walk into class, I will give them a file card with an emotion on one side and a group number on the other side. I will ask them not to share what is written on the paper with anyone else. The emotions will include rage, boredom, falling in love, contentment,

and grief. The groups are composed of five members each, with each person representing a different emotion.

Before breaking students into groups, I will hand out the worksheet (see attached) and ask students to fill it out, naming a color, taste, car, etc. based on their free-associations with their emotion. I will model the first three items using the emotion of boredom. I will prompt students not to think too much for each association, but to come up with the most specific association they can.

After students have completed their worksheets, I will break them into groups based on their group numbers. I will ask them to read their list aloud to their small group and have the group try to guess their emotion. If students guess correctly, the person reading aloud might want to ask them about the specific details that enabled them to guess the emotion. During this time, I will be listening in on the groups, listening for examples of imagery and the discussions.

Following the small-group exercise, I will lead a whole-group discussion on the task.

Sample questions:     Were people able to guess your emotion?  
                                  How were they able to guess?  
                                  Which details were especially helpful in guessing?  
                                  Are there similarities in how different people  
                                  described the same emotion? What color did people  
                                  associate with happiness? Rage?     Why?  
                                  What details were hard to guess? Why?

**Mini-Lesson/Debrief:**         These concrete details are examples of sensory details, or images. An image is when one thing is used to represent another. So, for example, the color red is often used to portray passion. Imagery appeals to some commonly held associations we share for abstract emotions or feelings. Not all of our associations will be common. Some will be rooted in an individual's experience that may be hard to decipher. But enough will be common so that writers can use these concrete images to connote a feeling or mood.

(Be prepared for a discussion of how different cultures might not share a common association; example of color imagery for mourning (black in US and white in China) or weddings (white in US and red in China). We might also talk about how advertisements use these associations to create certain feelings in their audiences.

### **Guided Practice: Whole group**

Following this brief discussion, I will hand out the poem "Dolor" by Theodore Roethke but without the title (see attached). On the bottom of the page will be columns for objects, places, colors, and smells. I will ask students to read through the poem and to circle examples of objects, places, colors, and smells named or evoked in the poem (example of the smell of lavatories, which is not named explicitly but which we associate with the place). They should then write the sensory detail under the appropriate column. I would model the first detail on the overhead projector to get them started. After

students have finished, I would ask them to guess, based on these details, what emotion they think is being depicted, and what specific details from the poem support their guesses. I would be writing down their responses in columns on the overhead as they talk.

If time, we might discuss why Roethke just doesn't tell us outright how the speaker is feeling, and why authors use imagery to show us an emotion rather than telling us the emotion directly.

### **Guided Practice for writing:**

Relatively soon in my sequence, I will come back to this activity, asking students to use the same sheet we used at the very beginning of class to brainstorm sensory details related to the particular incident they've chosen to describe. I would prompt them to add things to the list that are important to their incident and ignore associations (car) that don't really fit. I would have them to the initial brainstorm in class and use these details in their draft of the narrative.

### References

Nims, J. F. (1974). Western wind: An introduction to poetry. New York: Random House.

Oliver, M. (1994). A poetry handbook. New York: Harcourt Brace.

## Free Association

Color

Smell

Taste

Sound

Object

Animal

Food

Beverage

Place or Setting

Weather

Car

Music

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,  
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight,  
All the misery of manila folders and mucilage,  
Desolation in immaculate public places,  
Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,  
The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher,  
Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,  
Endless duplication of lives and objects.  
And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,  
Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,  
Sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,  
Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,  
Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

Theodore Roethke

Smells

Objects

Places

Colors

