



LESSON PLAN GRADES: 9-12

Memory Work: Creative Writing and Re-assembling ourselves through Story



OVERVIEW

In *North By Current*, we encounter a teacher in the form of a child's voice. This child's wisdom leads us to consider the way that: "Memory must be created against an abundance of information. But also against an absence. It has to be constructed. You assemble the fractures, arrange the incidents, to build a story." For every story we choose

to tell there are hundreds that we don't, and the ties that connect our past and the future selves are entanglements of narratives that give texture and meaning to our lives.

Creative writing is one approach to tapping into memory and imagination as sibling forces in processes of meaning-making and storytelling. This work allows writers to put pieces of a past together towards a future vision of possibility.

In this lesson students will engage in “memory work” through practices of creative writing and revision. They will move through stages of the writing process, understand key components of the craft, study models of literature that serve as examples of these genres, and support one another through collaborative revision processes that encourage re-vision, trust, and confidence in their own voices and narrative points of view.

A Note to Teachers

In this lesson you will be asking students to do “memory work” as they construct a story or poem that stems from personal experiences with one another, to workshop, revise, and offer feedback. Before doing this you need to be sure you've established a community of care within your classroom and that you remind students that what they will be writing will be shared with one another. This allows students to use their own discretion about what memories they will call forth into the work of creative nonfiction.

Subject Areas

This lesson can be used as a direct engagement with writing skills and/or modified to ask students to think critically about how stories are made through memory.

- Creative Writing
- English / Language Arts
- Humanities
- Social Studies

Grade Levels: 9-12

Objectives:

Students will:

- Learn about personal narrative writing
- Engage in the writing process and through this engagement practice writing skills, revision strategies, and strengthen their writing
- Establish their own personal voice through personal narrative writing
- Engage in peer editing to strengthen descriptive writing skills, clarity, and impact.
- Revise personal narrative pieces in order to understand how elements of writing can be strengthened

Materials

- Journals (or private writing materials); each student should have their own personal journal for this activity that they choose and that they love.
- Technology for screening film clips and playing music to accompany students while writing
- Pens and paper
- Appendices (attached at the end of this lesson)

Time Needed: Six Class Periods

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: Memory & Place [3:36 - 7:45], length: 4 minutes, 2 seconds

Short: Clip opens with a tree foregrounded against a frozen lake and ends with image of a restaurant and child voice saying “over and over.”

In this clip we learn about memory and place, the filmmaker describes the place he grew up, and considers how he may still find belonging in his hometown he left behind.

Clip 2: Memory and Absence [27:13 - 34:45], length: 7 Minutes, 32 Seconds

Short: Clip opens with image of child banging hand against window and ends with child eating a donut.

In this clip we learn bits and pieces of this family's story, of the filmmakers intention and how the story assembled itself. We then are asked to consider how memory lives in relation to storytelling - both presences and absences.

Clip 3: Memory and Morality [37:15 - 40:54], length: 3 minutes, 39 seconds

Short: Clip opens with child sitting on couch and closes with child laughing in fake guillotine

Here we come to understand through narration, how memory and the stories we craft carry the weight - at times - of our own sense of our self as good or bad, moral or immoral, and how we are allowed to question this narrative.

Clip 4: Memory and Imagination [56:15 - 57:44], length: 1 minute, 29 seconds

Short: Clip opens with child scooting down stairs and ends with image of ducks swimming

Grief is brought into the landscape of memory, storytelling, and how we imagine what has happened and what will be in the future. We are asked to consider how this sea of functions impacts what we know of endings and beginnings and the selves we may become.

Clip 5: Memory and Renewal [1:14:41 - 1:15:44], length: 1 minute, 3 seconds

Short: Clip opens with Madsen playing guitar and closes with child on a swing

Painful memories can be so great, Madsen reminds us in this clip, that in order to heal you have to speak the memory over and over again. His family sings together happily, foretelling the possibility of healing and change for the future selves they are all becoming.

ACTIVITIES

DAY ONE: Introducing the Personal Narrative Project

NOTE: This lesson requires dedicated and uninterrupted time for students to engage in multiple stages of the writing process. Before you begin, it is important that you share the stages of the writing process with students and some tips for their personal writing.

STEP ONE: Write these questions on the board:

- *What is the difference between memory and imagination?*
- *What are some good reasons for reflecting, journaling, and getting ideas out on the page, uncensored?*
- *What are some differences between journal writing and published pieces of writing?*

Tell students they will have about ten minutes to write in their journals and to consider these questions. Remind them of the following:

1. In your journal there are no rules and no critics. You should write honestly, take risks, let your ideas flow freely and without worrying about grammar or mechanics or anything else. No one will read this, but you.
2. Keep your pen moving for the entire ten minutes. Even if you do not know what to write, then try writing "I don't know what to write" until some ideas flow again. The only way for things to happen and ideas to come to you is for you to write. You must write! Commit to writing until the time is up.
3. Talk to yourself in your journal, get to know yourself and your thoughts!
4. There is no order of ideas or thoughts, and remember NO CRITICS! Don't be hard on yourself about how your ideas make their way to the page, just let them out, and honor them and your experiences. Use "I" statements, write about your feelings, and don't be afraid to say what is real.
5. Experiment and play! Your journal is a safe and private place for you to write however you'd like with no rules and to be kind to yourself as you express your ideas.

6. Get curious and more curious and even more curious. If you get stuck and want to take an idea deeper, try asking yourself “what do I really mean by x, y, z?” or “can I get even more specific when I am trying to describe x, y, z?”

Ask students if they have any questions, and if not, set a timer for ten minutes. Play some gentle music and tell them to begin writing until the timer goes off.

STEP TWO: *Reflect on how journaling feels*

Ask students how it felt to write freely and with no rules. Do not ask them to share what they wrote in their journals - your goal is to help them get comfortable with the process of writing. If students want to share then support them, offer affirmations, and encourage them regarding their experiences.

STEP THREE: *Memory, Imagination, and Storytelling & North By Current*

Write this question on the board: *How do we know what we know? How much did we know when we were children? Where has all that knowing gone?*

Ask students to hold this question in their minds and tell them you are going to play a series of film clips. After each clip, explain to them that they will be given 5-10 minutes to reflect in their journals. This is an opportunity for them to practice freely writing and thinking and to not try and have “answers” necessarily, but to consider the possibilities in conversation with film clips from *North By Current*.

Share overall context: These clips are from a documentary called *North By Current* made by filmmaker and artist Angelo Madsen. Madsen returns to his rural Michigan hometown after a family tragedy. Weaving vignettes of VHS and Super 8 home movies with the present day, Madsen creates a poetic, nuanced portrait of a family navigating grief, addiction, and transgender identity.

As they watch, ask them to consider the differences between memory and imagination and write in conversation with their own lives and the stories they hear in the clips.

STEP FOUR: *Play Film Clips One at a Time. Share the titles “Memory and ____.” After each clip has finished, provide 5-10 minutes of private journal writing time for your students as time allows.*

DAY TWO: *Memory, Imagination, and Writing our Stories*

STEP ONE: *Introducing Memory-Work*

Write this quote from the film clip on the board:

“Memory must be created against an abundance of information. But also against an absence. It has to be constructed. You assemble the fractures, arrange the incidents, to build a story.”

Ask students to take the first ten minutes of class, reflecting on yesterday's activities and this quote in their journals. If questions would be helpful to get them started you can ask:

How is memory created against absence?

How can memory be constructed?

In what ways does memory become a story we tell ourselves?

STEP TWO: *Share ideas about memory and imagination and storytelling as a class.*

Ask the above questions to generate more sharing as students consider the nuances between the three. After students have shared their thoughts on the differences between memory and imagination, introduce the daily writing activity to them. Tell them they will begin today by drawing a map as the starting point to explore their own personal memories.

STEP THREE: *Mapping Memories*

Share Appendix A: Mapping Memories Handout with Students to guide them through their personal writing practice today.

DAY THREE & FOUR: Towards Public Writing

STEP ONE: Building a Narrative

Give students Appendix B: Towards Public Writing and review the handout with them. This work is meant to be carried out in their journals and they should have the entire class period, broken up into sections for sharing - if they'd like - with other students.

STEP Two: Tell students to bring three printed copies of their first drafts to your next class meeting so you can all workshop each others' writing

DAY FIVE: Workshopping and Building a Community of Writers

STEP ONE: Introduce the idea of a Writing Group.

Tell students that they will be put into groups of three and that the purpose of these writing groups is to be generous, supportive, and help one another strengthen their pieces of writing and move them into final draft form. Rules for writing group:

- *Give full attention to the person who is reading*
- *No one is an expert - we are ALL writers! We are here to listen and identify what "works" and to ask questions*
- *Respect one another and honor the experiences that are being shared*
- *Say thank you after each person shares.*

STEP TWO: Workshop Works! Here's how it works:

- *Students get into groups of three and each person passes out a copy of their story so that everyone can follow along as individual writers read their stories.*
- *Tell students that they are not allowed to say anything about their story before they read it - they cannot say "this is dumb" or "it's still pretty bad" or anything like that...they just say "here is my story" and begin reading.*
- *One member of the group volunteers to read first.*

- *As each writer reads, members of the workshop group follow along and pay attention to what stands out. Listeners (group members) can mark up the page they are holding in order to remember what to come back to.*
- *After the writer reads their story, members of the workshop group reflect and share the following:*
 - *What stands out and “works” for them as readers*
 - *Positive comments about certain images, descriptions, or language choice that helped them - as readers - feel connected to the story*
 - *Questions they have about the story/the piece. (ex. A reader can say something like “When you were describing the buzzing of the alarm clock, was there someone else in the room with you?”)*
 - *Questions can be about any place in the piece that was unclear, where readers were a bit confused, or where an image left them feeling puzzled. It is important that these are formed as questions so help students learn to ask good questions and model this as you join student workshop groups.*
 - *Suggestions to help strengthen the piece of writing.*
 - *Remind students that - just like questions - suggestions are more helpful the more specific they are. Encourage them to offer concrete and sample suggestions for revision ideas that will help the piece to become more powerful.*
- *As readers share their praise, ideas, and questions, writers should take note of them and write them down to support their final revision.*
- *Once a group has finished having a conversation about one writer’s work, they should all thank the writer for sharing their piece and the writer should thank their group members for offering questions and ideas.*
- *Repeat this process for each piece of writing and for each writer.*

STEP THREE: Revision and Preparation of final piece

- *Students should take their notes from workshop home with them and revise this draft into a final piece of writing to share, in class, tomorrow.*
- *Students should bring a single printed copy of their final piece of writing to the following class*

DAY SIX: Celebrating and Sharing

- *Have students put their chairs or desks in a circle if possible*
- *One at a time, ask students to share their piece of writing - reading clearly and confidently, beginning with the title of the piece, with the class.*
- *As each writer shares their story, classmates listen carefully to what is being read and shared.*
- *After each writer reads their piece, you all thank them for sharing and then move onto the next writer.*

EXTENSIONS

One idea for an extension is to have students write “Thank you Notes” to each other. Invite students to reflect on one or two pieces of writing that really resonated with them and to write a thank you note to their classmate sharing why/how/in what way their story made an impact. Hand out these thank you notes and allow students time to read them privately.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM TOLLIVER, JR.



Will Tolliver Jr. is a Pittsburgh based leader, innovator, and change-maker recognized throughout the education community as an Early Learning Expert. Will holds a B.A. in Environmental Studies with a minor in Anthropology and Community and Justice Studies from Allegheny College. The environment, communities, and our future leaders inspire him to ignite new perspectives around the globe. Will has contributed to various projects and lent his skills to grant writing, project implementation and management, curriculum development, event planning, tutoring and mentoring, and incubating new innovations. He has worked with organizations like PBS, Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, and PAEYC to move the mission forward for children.

APPENDIX A: MAPPING MEMORIES

Writing Exploration: You will draw a map today as you go back in your memory and reflect on the meaningful places you lived, played, celebrated, shared time with family and friends, etc.

Before you begin...

Close your eyes and sit quietly and reflect on yourself ten years ago...or five years ago...or fifteen years ago. Think back to that child self and then, when you have arrived, look around. Where are you? Who is there with you? Begin making a list of places and the people who come to mind.

Step One:

List all of these places in your journal and the people who were with you.

Step Two:

Select one place that holds the most power for you in your memory. Begin to draw that place in your journal. Sketch a map of this place. Do not be concerned about whether it is accurate, rather sketch this place as you remember it with all the smallest details you can conjure.

Step Three:

After you have drawn all the special places, cul-de-sacs, corners, closets, hiding places, etc. begin to make notes on your map to capture memories. Label the places with words then write some memories connected to those individuals places. Try to remember the smallest, most insignificant details that bring this map to life.

Examples:

My sister and I used to swim in this river in the summers until she left for college.

- I would sit on this porch and eat ice cream with my dog, Meatball, he was my best friend.
- I built this treehouse with my dad when I was 8. When I was 12, this is where he told me he and mom were getting divorced.

There are no rules for how you annotate this map, but just let as many memories come out as you can. Fill the map with notes and memories that are connected to places, people, and your past.

Step Four: Selecting a Piece to Polish

Spend the rest of this class period looking at and reflecting on your map. Consider which place and the memories attached to that place conjure the most memories for you. Select a place that is filled with memory-stories, then select one or two memories connected to that place to continue workshopping over the course of the week.

APPENDIX B: TOWARDS PUBLIC WRITING

Writing Exploration: By now you have selected a focus for your writing that you will

begin to craft with an audience in mind. This handout will guide you through a writing process to help give details, emotion, texture, and meaning to the memory you have decided to spend time making into a narrative. You will begin crafting ideas in your journal, your private thoughts and emotions and experiences are all drafts that will not be shared until it is time to move towards your final piece of writing.

To begin...Day One of Writing

Close your eyes and sit quietly. Hold the memory you have selected in your mind and try to think only of that memory, that span of time (minutes, hours, days) spent in the place where that memory was made. Zoom out and try to visualize your past self in that place (ex. Picture yourself swinging on the tire swing in the city park beside your childhood home.)

As you reflect, write some details of that moment in your journal...

1. Start with feelings. You do not have to have “perfect” language to describe the feelings that this memory brings up, but as you reflect on that very small and particular moment in your life just notice what feelings come up for you. Write them all in your journal without judgment. Write freely. Write honestly. Write to figure out what feelings are there and keep your pen moving on the page for 5-10 minutes.
2. Next, consider the details - the smaller the better. What was the weather like at that moment? Was it day or night, cloudy or clear, was the moon full? Were you wearing a winter hat or summer shoes? What sounds can you recall? Were there birds, was the wind rustling the trees, were cars groaning past, was there water singing or an AC Unit humming? Write the smallest, most insignificant details that you recall and keep writing them as they come to you...collect as many details in your journal as you possibly can and keep writing for 10 minutes.
3. Follow with images, snapshots, and describe this memory as if it were a photograph or home video. Give names to people who were there with you, show how they carry themselves with words, and how they look and smell and smile. Write for 5-10 minutes thinking of as many images and colors and movements as you can conjure.

Moving from your journal into the draft. Now look at all you have collected, recalled, and the pictures and sounds you have brought into the life of this memory...

Consider, as you read over what you have written in your journal, what is “real.” Real,

for the purposes of this project, does not mean “facts” or “True” with a capital “T.” Rather, you should consider what feels most *honest* to you and what parts of this memory are asking to be considered more thoroughly.

1. Identify what story is trying to be told and what feelings are asking to be attended to as you identify what is Real.
2. Begin to pare down this memory, tighten it up, assign language to a series of moments, and eliminate unnecessary language. Begin to tell the memory like a story.
3. Write about your past self in the third person (ex. Romeo loved to wear his summer shorts rolled up four inches above his knees) and start telling the story of that person in that *very particular* moment with as much detail as you can bring into the story. Treat every word with a preciousness and use language to paint a picture for your readers. Remember, you can write about your past self and include feelings and thoughts, wonderings and questions, and details about the environment that help give shape and a sense of the Real to this moment.
4. You are working on writing your first draft of this memory story so try not to “explain” the memory, but just describe it fully with your words and images.
5. Keep this public piece under 500 words and remember that this first draft is *just a draft*. It will be revised and polished before your final.