

Megan Bakan: Writing Through the Senses

The following activities, which are adapted from a presentation given by Kathy St. John, provide some ways to get the creative writing juices flowing.

Mouth Watering Details (Taste)

Have you ever craved a food? Have you ever tasted a food and thought, “What is in this? There is a familiar flavor in this dish.” Then, aha! It comes to you (or not).

Buy assorted flavored jelly beans. There are many gourmet flavors and even gross flavors from the Harry Potter series. Put a couple of jelly beans of the same flavor in a small dish. Give each student a different flavor. Make sure you keep track of which jelly bean is which flavor and who gets which flavor. Then give your student these directions.

1. Taste your jelly beans.
2. Write three or more adjectives (describing words) that describe the taste. Make a guess as to the flavor of your jelly beans. Write your name on your paper.

Then collect the papers. Read each person’s adjectives. Have the class guess the flavor based on the description. Read the author’s guess. Tell the class the flavor. Continue with each person’s adjectives. Write the adjectives on the board as you read each list. Then you can tally which adjectives are used most frequently to discuss common versus unique descriptors.

Sniffing Out Stories (Smell)

Have you ever caught a whiff of something cooking, someone’s cologne, or other odor and had a flood of memories come to you? Our sense of smell is said to have the strongest link to our memories of any of our senses.

Place a highly scented item in a plastic bag such as coffee, cinnamon stick, or rose petals. The same item should be in all of the bags. Give one bag to each person with the following directions.

1. Take a few moments to open your bag and take in the aroma of the item in the bag. What comes to your mind?
2. Working in pairs, take turns telling your partner what image or memory the scent brings to your mind.
3. Write three (or more) sentences about the image or memory that you just described to your partner.
4. If you wish, share your writing with the group.

It is fun to hear the different reactions that each person has to the same scent!

What is in the Bag? (Tactile)

Have you ever stuck your hand in your purse searching it’s depths for that lost lip balm, fingering each item until you feel the smooth, cylindrical shape with the little bumpy wheel on the end? Your tactile sense saved you from having to dump all of the contents of your purse on the floor!

To prepare for this activity collect an assortment of small items with different shapes and textures: small toys such as tops or plastic animals, kitchen items such as corkscrews or tea balls, office items such as binder clips or hand pencil sharpeners. Place each item in a brown paper bag. Give one bag to each person with the following directions.

1. **Do not look in your bag!**
2. Working on your own, put your hand in your bag and touch the object inside.
3. Write five words to describe the object you are feeling.
4. Make a guess – what is your object?

Go around the room having each person read their description and guess. Does anyone else want to guess? Then pull out the object. Is it what you thought?

Visualizing and Verbalizing. (Visual)

Good readers create pictures of what they read in their heads. Good writers do the same thing. But it takes practice to give enough detail in your writing so that the reader can create an accurate image. The goal of this activity is for one person to describe a photograph in sufficient detail to her partner so that he can visualize the picture.

Look in magazines for interesting photographs. Magazines such as Smithsonian or National Geographic have intriguing pictures. Cut out the pictures so that no captions are included. Paste each photograph onto a separate sheet of construction paper. Participants should work in pairs.

1. Give a photograph face down to each pair.
2. Have each pair decide who will describe first (partner 1) and who will listen first (partner 2).
3. Partner 1 can turn the picture over and look at it. Do not show it to partner 2!
4. Partner 1: Tell your partner about every single detail that you see in your picture. Remember to talk about color, texture, size, perspective etc.
5. Partner 2: Listen carefully to the description. Jot down key words and phrases that will help you visualize the image. You may ask any question you like to help you visualize the picture. As you listen to your partner's description, notice how your mental image changes based upon the new information you receive.
6. When both partners are satisfied that the picture is fully described, show the picture to partner 2. How does the picture compare to the mental image created? What is different? What is the same? Remember there is no right or wrong answer.

Now change roles and repeat the exercise. Each pair can share their experience and pictures with the group.

Visualizing and Writing (Hearing)

We all like different kinds of music and we all hear different things when listening to music. Chose a piece of music (something for which there is not a music video if possible). Give the following directions.

1. Working on your own, listen to the music. Close your eyes, if you wish, and begin to create a movie/poem/story in your mind that goes with the music.
2. When you feel the time is right, begin to write down whatever came into your mind as you listened to the music. Write as much or as little as you would like.
3. When the music stops, you may share your writing with the group.

Each of the above activities provides the participant with an opportunity to tap into their senses before they begin writing. Our senses are a valuable storehouse of knowledge; they can breathe life into our writing. Have fun!