



Mini-Lesson: Where Do You Write?

This mini-lesson asks students to reflect on where they do their best writing. A good “get to know you” activity for the beginning of the year, it gives teachers an introduction to their students’ writing process and (with luck) invites students to consider how they might improve their writing by considering their setting.

Materials Needed:

1. Either the computer lab so that each student can view videos independently OR a teacher’s computer connected to visible screen (such as an LCD or HD projector, SmartBoard or Promethean touch screen, etc.).
2. If working in the computer lab, I suggest headphones for each student.
3. Internet access to reach the “Writers on the Fly” website at www.writersonthefly.org.
4. City of Literature documentary, available from Iowa Area Education Association (AEA) collections or online at: www.cityofliteraturefilm.org/watch.
5. Composition materials for students; this could be the computers if in the computer lab, or writing journals, or loose leaf notebook paper with pen or pencil.

Anticipatory Set:

The authors interviewed for the “On the Fly: Writers on Writing” program were asked a similar series of questions, but their answers diverged greatly. One standard question was *Where do you write?* (in some videos the question is changed slightly: *What is your favorite quiet place?* with the implied ‘to write’ left unstated.)

If working in a computer lab, direct the students to the “On the Fly: Writers on Writing” website and ask them to select any video to watch. Instruct them to pay special attention to WHERE this author writes—what is that author’s answer to the “What is your favorite quiet place?” question? Videos vary in length from five to fifteen minutes, so if allowing students to choose for themselves, budget about 15 minutes of time for this portion. After viewing, invite students to discuss what those authors had to say about where they write.

If you are working as a whole class (or if you have a limited amount of time), use the City of Literature documentary. Fast forward to 13:25, where you will find the question “Where do you write?” answered by a half-dozen authors in about ninety seconds.

Write on the Fly:

In a ten-minute essay, ask students to write their own response to the question: “Where do you write?” If they were being interviewed for the “On the Fly” series, how would they describe the setting where they do their best writing—for school or for themselves.

For students who find it difficult to begin, ask them to be reporters of their own experience by responding to the “Five Ws and one H” (you might even consider cutting and pasting these questions into a PowerPoint that could scroll while the kids were writing):

- What? Your setting may change depending on what you are writing—a class essay or a poem or song lyrics or a diary entry or a short story or a love letter. Choose one type of writing—perhaps the one you care about the most or the one you do the most—and use that kind of writing in mind when you respond to these questions.
- Who? When you want to do good writing, who is there? Do you need to be alone or around other people? Why does that help your writing? Are there people (parents, siblings, friends, teachers) that you allow to read your writing before anyone else sees it? How do those “first readers” help your writing?
- When? When you want to do your best writing, when does that happen? First thing in the morning? Middle of Sunday afternoon? Midnight? Why does this time of day seem to be best for your writing?
- Where? Do you have a desk in your room at home or do you do your best writing at the kitchen table or a quiet corner of the library or a table in a noisy café? Describe that setting—its sights and sounds—and then explain what it is about that setting that helps you write.
- Why? What motivates you to write? Do you write only when assigned? If you write for pleasure, why?
- How? How do you write—do you compose only on a computer or tablet or phone? Do you writing everything by hand first? Do you insist on a specific kind of pen or pencil? How does composing in this way help your writing?

Students could answer these questions in any order, they could choose to focus on some but not others, or they could ignore them altogether and respond to the prompt in their own way. Encourage the students use complete sentences and with sensory detail and good explanation.

Teachers should consider participating in this ten-minute free-write with their students—it shows that writing is something you think about value, not just something you make them do.

After the Writing:

Consider sharing your writing with them by reading it aloud, and then invite volunteers to read their work as well. You might discuss as a class what similarities they find within the class and what parallels they see with the writers from the “On the Fly: Writers on Writing” videos. Are there any “best practices” that can be learned from our shared experience?

Collect your student’s work and read without a pen in your hand—just learn about your students, their process and approach to writing, and think about it when reading their future work. If you write anything in response, consider making a connection (“I do that too because...”) or a contrast (“I would find it hard to write like that because...”).

If you keep portfolios of student work, keep this in their portfolio and ask them to re-read it at the end of the year—has their writing process or writing place changed over the year? This could be a great reflect piece as a student learns what works best for them when writing.