

Fast Write Assignment(s)

Objective

The Fast Write activity is meant to get students creatively writing for ten minutes using defined “story starters.” Students improve their writing and critiquing skills.

Summary

A 15-20 minute exercise, Fast Writes can be broken down into roughly three steps: write, share with a partner, share with class. The first step takes the longest, a little more than 10 minutes. The teacher provides 3-4 sentences from other sources (we use classic and contemporary novels, but really any work will do) as “story starters.” The students pick one of these sentences as the first sentence of a story they will write for the next ten minutes. The story does not need to be finished or evidence mastery of creative writing - it is solely for the students’ growth. After the ten minutes of writing, the students pair with one another about the room and read each other’s stories (out loud or to themselves, though we encourage the former as a practice). The reader/listener is encouraged to ask questions like what they want to know more about or what the story left them wondering. The reader is not allowed to answer those inquiries. Then, when all the students have shared (5 min, usually), the class comes back together, and the teacher asks 1-3 students to read their stories aloud, and the rest of the class asks questions or states what they liked/noticed. At the end of the Fast Write duration (a week to a week and a half), the students turn in 5 full pages of writing, which are to be graded solely on page count, not quality of writing, as that would limit the students’ creativity in the future by making them more apprehensive about their writing.

CC Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A: Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.C: Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Procedure

1. Have students get a notebook with line paper or a loose-leaf sheet of lined paper they can hold on to.
 - a. If the students have started a fast write cycle, they can just draw a line at the end of their last FW and just start their new one under the line.
 - b. Using the backside of papers should be encouraged.
2. Provide students with 3-4 story starters. These story starters should be different each time (see below for sample story starters). It is helpful to read the starters aloud and clarify anything if necessary.
3. Allow the students a minute to choose and write down what starter they chose.
 - a. It is good to quickly survey the class while they write about who picked what starter by a show of hands. This helps the teacher see which starters are more popular among classes, chart trends, and look for those students who like to try the less obvious.
 - b. When first starting this activity, it important to make sure the students know that they are writing as far as they can in the 10 minutes and that these stories do NOT have to be complete stories.
4. Give the students 10 minutes to write.
 - a. This is quiet work time.
 - b. no student should 'sit' when finished - all students should write until the 10 minutes is completed.
5. After the 10 minutes, pair the students off (make one or two groups of 3, if necessary) so they can read their stories aloud to their partners
 - a. Students should be free to find their own "spot" in the room for this part of the activity. They need to feel comfortable sharing.
 - b. If acceptable, it helps to open the hallway outside the classroom for 1-3 groups of students, depending on the size of the class. This can alleviate the 'noise flood' of so many students reading aloud at once in the classroom.
 - c. Students can, if they want, read each other's writing silently rather than share aloud if verbal sharing makes them uncomfortable, but the reading aloud should be encouraged.
6. After each student shares, the other in the pair (the listener) should ask questions like what they are wondering about the plot or characters, or they can state what they liked about the story.
 - a. The reader is not allowed to respond to the questions.

- b. It is good to ask authors if they just wrote as they went or if they have a rough plan of the story, including where it would/could go if they continued it.
7. Bring the students back together as a class.
8. Ask if any student(s) would volunteer to read their work aloud.
 - a. Especially early on in this assignment, best practice is to get volunteer readers, even if it requires coaxing. Calling on someone to read can make the students apprehensive about what they can write, thus limiting their creativity during the 10 minutes of writing.
9. Allow 1-3 students, depending on the desire, to read their stories.
 - a. After each student shares, pose questions to the class about what they noticed, liked, and/or wonder about.
 - b. Again, the writer/sharer is not permitted to respond to any questions.
10. Have the students put their freewrites away in a place where they can keep track of them and access them the next day they do a freewrite activity.

Story Starters

- "A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head." (*A Confederacy of Dunces*, John Kennedy Toole)
- "See the Child." (*Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy)
- "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood." (*Sula*, Toni Morrison)
- "Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path in single file." (*As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner)
- "On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide--it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese--the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope." (*The Virgin Suicides*, Jeffrey Eugenides)
- "The night sky brightened faintly in the east with the approach of dawn as the Chosen entered the Gardens of Life." *The Elfstones of Shannara*, Terry Brooks)
- "I clasp the flask between my hands even though the warmth from the tea has long since leached into the frozen air." (*Catching Fire*, Suzanne Collins)
- "God is a slick God." (*The Reapers Are the Angels*, Alden Bell)
- "When a new bridge between two sovereign states of the United States has been completed, it is time for speech" (*The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Edward Abbey)
- "The first outbreak I saw was in a remote village that officially had no name." (*World War Z*, Max Brooks)
- "I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest." (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard)
- "It was the best of times it was the worst of times."
- "On a cold, fretful afternoon in early October, 1872, a hansom cab drew up outside the offices Lockhart and Selby, Shipping Agents in the financial heart of London, and a young girl got out and paid the driver."
- "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a fortune must be in want of a wife."
- 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.'
- "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did."
- ""The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."
- "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin."
- "It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love."
- "Elmer Gantry was drunk. He was eloquently drunk, lovingly and pugnaciously drunk."
- "The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting."
- "It was the day my grandmother exploded."
- "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish."

Alternative Starter - Let the Dice Decide

1. Come up with 6-7 choices for each of these three categories: character, setting, conflict.
 - a. character examples: a student, an 84 year-old woman, a police officer, a weatherman, a homeless child, a superhero/villain, etc.
 - b. setting examples: a college party, a polluted river, a football game, the top of a skyscraper, etc.
 - c. conflict examples: someone must reveal or share a secret with another, a decision must be made, an important dinner needs to be prepared, a child has run away, etc.
2. Give to each student or group of students a dice.
3. Instruct the students to roll the die 3 times, and to record the number they roll each time in the margin of their FW paper for that day.
4. Then announce the results: "Your first roll was for your character. If you rolled a 1, you get this, 2 is this, 3 is this, etc." Repeat for all three.
5. Let the students create and write using just this information for the normal 10 minutes.
6. When they share, have the students state what they had to work with based on their rolls before reading aloud.

NOTE: This alternative should be used sparingly. Maybe once every two cycles. It is more time consuming (2-3 extra minutes)