

Post-Card Writing or Picture-Prompts

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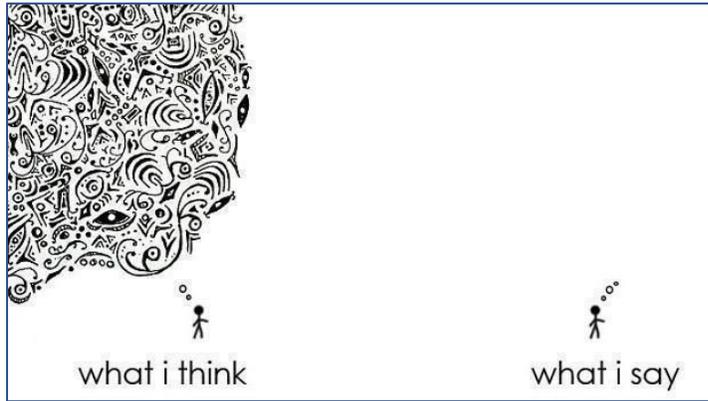


Source: Microsoft Bing Images

Many Teachers will tell you that creative writing is an enjoyable activity that many students find rewarding and readily participate in. However, when the 'rules of writing' are unknown to you, or you struggle with spelling or grammar, or you feel you are not as creative or 'smart' as other kids, writing becomes a painful experience. Sometimes students have difficulty generating words or descriptions, or because they may struggle in areas related to executive functioning or working memory, they struggle to hold or organize thoughts in their heads long enough to easily write a piece of work that has flow and meaning.

While learning to speak develops naturally in most children, learning to read and write does not occur naturally. It requires substantial teaching, practice, feedback and application of knowledge from our long-term and short-term working memories. In his article, *Training writing skills: A cognitive developmental perspective* (2008), Ronald Kellogg states that learning to write well is a life-long endeavour that involves our entire language system, and that thinking is the key to learning to write well. This thinking is what can be trained over years to reach mastery.

In some instances children struggle to apply what they know to their writing and may need a prompt to help generate linkages to their prior knowledge. In other instances children have lots of ideas in their heads but cannot organize their thoughts to resemble what they are thinking. They too may need prompts to help them choose ideas from their storehouse of thoughts.



I've always loved this illustration...I'm sorry, I don't know where it comes from, but it illustrates perfectly for me how I know many students struggle with the writing experience.

Although the illustration is more accurately used to describe the disconnect between what I think and what I can communicate verbally, it also can apply to what I'm able to communicate in writing.

I recently saw an invitation by the Alberta Teacher's Association on Instagram for Teacher Hacks...tips and strategies teachers use in their classrooms.

MY TEACHER HACK is called Post-Card Writing, also known as Picture-Prompts. As you look at the photo at the top of this page, can you imagine how you might use a picture like this to generate writing ideas? For example, what might a good newspaper headline be for this picture, or what do you think the girls off to the side are thinking about the scrum that the boys are involved in? Could you use this image to create a funny meme?

In his book *Brain Rules* (2008) by John Medina, he states that "Vision trumps all other senses," and challenges educators to consider using more visual representations to generate thinking and creativity. Using images involves a great deal of the brain. Using images creates interest and novelty (and the brain loves novelty!) and generates a sense of cognitive familiarity....that is, everyone does not see themselves as good with reading or writing or mathematics, but we all feel somewhat equal when it comes to comprehending an image and being about to generate ideas about it.

In the article I wrote for Teacher Hacks I said,

"I'm not sure where I borrowed the concept of Post-Card Writing from, but it was one of the most enjoyable and differentiated activities I've used to motivate students to engage in creative writing. It can be used in many subject areas and purposes depending on the images you use. It's an inclusive activity that welcomes all students to participate, including students new to Canada, and those with varying levels of skill and ability".

Early in my teaching career I taught in a maximum security youth prison in New Brunswick. My students were usually middle to high school students, and many of them had learning and behavioural disorders, experienced years of struggle in public education, and were very reluctant to fail any further in their schooling. So instead of failing again in front of what they believed to be a tough and critical group of peers, they would often not attempt to start something they were weak in or they would give up quickly. Imagine trying to get a group of 15 and 16 year-olds to engage in middle and high school ELA, math and Social Studies after years of failure and frustration. Add to this that many of my students had ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and histories of school suspensions and expulsions.

When I began teaching at the youth jail I was informed that there were boxes of old books and magazines in storage that I should sort through, keep what I wanted, and then throw out all that was not useful. I discovered boxes of old National Geographic magazines that just didn't feel right to discard. I guess that's what former teachers must have felt as well and that's why there were so many of these magazines stored away. National Geographic photographers seemed to me to be some of the most talented and lucky people in the world. They saw things that most of us only dream of, and their photos generated within me a wonder about what it must have been like to be in that location. When my students looked at them I could sense the same feeling of wonder and awe, and often they would laugh about some of the pictures. Several of my students were unable to read and could not discover for themselves what was actually happening in the photograph...so they made up what was happening, and their imaginations and sense of humour often made the images even more interesting.

That gave me an idea; if my students enjoyed looking at these pictures as much as they appeared to, and they were so quick to add meaning to the photos, why not use this opportunity to merge the two ideas.

Not only did I have at my disposal years of old National Geographic magazines, but for some reason I had several sheets of black posterboard also kept in storage. I think it must have been used for picture frames or something...I don't know...but having this strong and sturdy posterboard provided me something that I could mount pictures on. Of course, you don't need to have physical copies of National Geographic or any other magazine available to do this activity with students. Any type of cardboard would do and pictures can be found online and either printed or displayed at the front of the room or on individual devices. I do believe the best way to do this activity, which does require a bit of effort from the teacher beforehand, is having an assortment of individual photos, mounted on a stiff backing so images can be used more than once over time. Allowing each student to have their own picture is not necessary, of course, because some activities may call for only one photo to be displayed for the entire class.

Place an interesting, age-appropriate, funny, provocative or political or scientific related picture on a piece of poster board, line them up along the bottom of the blackboard or whiteboard with the pictures hidden. Have enough for each student to choose one photo. Ask students to come up and randomly choose a picture and have them do a writing activity with it. Again, you can also do activities where everyone uses the same photo, displayed at the front of the room, depending on the purpose of your activity.



It probably goes without saying that the teacher needs to be wise in the images that are chosen as writing prompts. In the image above of the donkey lifted in the air by the overloaded cart, someone wrote the caption, “How to tell if your ass is too small”it took several minutes to get the class back to work after hearing that title.

I’m going to create a couple of bullet lists below to highlight some possible usages for Post-Card Writing, but these lists are incomplete. Really, the initial purpose of Post-Card writing for me was to get reluctant writers to start some form of writing and THEN use their writing to teach them about writing. You know what they say, “it’s easier to steer a moving cart”. So, if you have some reluctant writers, perhaps this activity can generate some place to start.

I’ve used Post-Card Writing to get my students to:

- offer an opinion
- expand their vocabulary usage in writing
- write good topic sentences or
- write good supporting details
- think from various perspectives of those within the photo
- expand their imaginations
- draw on prior knowledge
- think creatively
- think intelligently and look at all aspects of the photo

Teachers can use photos to prompt many writing activities, such as;

- creating a newspaper heading (summarizing the main idea)
- describing what one character in the image is thinking (perspective taking)
- explain what’s going on in the image (descriptive language)

- creating a meme from the image (humour is a form of intelligence that touches on social understanding, context, figures of speech, language comprehension, and more)
- writing a story based on the image (concept generation)
- Teachers can also begin the activity by suggesting a plot or a situation that the student must finish.

Post-Card Writing allows teachers to start small and build up to more creative and expansive writing. Post-Card Writing was a very fun activity in my classroom and got a lot of reluctant writers to begin the writing process without feeling too much anxiety or pressure.

This is important. There is a section of the brain, located in your brain stem, through which all sensory information first must transition. We want all information to pass through this region and out to the cerebral cortex of our brain for processing. However, this brain stem area—known as the Reticular Activating System—serves as a filter that prevents injury. Injury? What do I mean? This area of brain contains neurons that are designed to protect us from threat of any sort. We are designed to react with a fight or flight or freeze response to threat. That threat can come in the form of embarrassment, insult, fear of failure and so on. When we believe that we are going to be embarrassed or that someone will make fun of us when confronted with a challenge, activity or information, we are likely to avoid it, or push back against it in some way, or feel unable to respond (like writer's block). Neuroscientists tell us one of the ways to prime the RAS so as that information gets to where it needs to go is to learn in an environment that is perceived to be safe and supportive (like your classroom) and that novelty and change can also help with this safe passage of ideas to the cerebral cortex. Novelty and enjoyable activities are readily acceptable by the RAS and it will not screen out this information. Post-Card Writing is often an enjoyable and safe activity—a conduit—to get students to work on the craft of writing without feeling initial intimidation or threat.

It is much easier to help nudge students toward better writing once you have something to provide feedback and direction on. Post-Card Writing carries with it a wide range of possibilities that a teacher can use to get reluctant writers to start writing.