



Before Papers Come Paragraphs

Introductory Unit

Lesson 2: Elbow Grease and Black Berets: The Dual Nature of Writing

The Denim Beret:
a writing school
for teens

Supplies: writing notebook; pen or pencil

Goal: to lay the foundation for strong skills by understanding better what writing is.

What to send me: warm-up #2

Suggested time: 1 session

SESSION 1

Before You Begin...A Note about Lesson Warm-up Exercises

In lesson 1 you completed the first warm-up of this course as your assignment. From this point forward, you will complete them in your writing notebook at the *beginning* of each lesson through unit 3. Warm-ups in unit 4 will be optional.

You may be tempted to skip the warm-ups, but please understand that not only will you receive a completion grade on them, they are also an integral part of the course. If you do anything different from what the course assigns, it should be to do more warm-ups.

Many writers do such exercises regularly, either as warm-ups to their writing or as stand-alone practice exercises. We will follow the example of professional writers as much as possible during this course, so warm-ups are important. But why? What is the purpose of warm-up exercises? Although I discussed it some in lesson 1, let's quickly review.

Such exercises have at least two purposes. First, they help to wake up your brain to prepare it for more challenging work with writing, in much the same way as warm-up drills do for math lessons or stretching does for running. Second, they help you keep your voice natural and relaxed. As you study techniques and rules during this course—what I'll call the "craft" of writing—you may find yourself stiffening up as you write, because you want to do everything

right. Your voice may become wooden and stilted as a result, so the warm-ups will help you remember what it means to relax and write naturally without fear of criticism and “doing things wrong.”

Warm-up: Exercise 2- Writing from a Word

This time you will do a variation of exercise 1. Rather than choosing a topic of interest, you will instead take a word at random and make that your topic. As with the previous exercise, you will write about this topic for a minimum of 10-15 minutes.

To begin, ask your parent or a sibling to choose any noun, verb, or adjective that comes to mind, or else you may look at or inside a book and use the first noun, verb, or adjective that you see. Be sure that the word is one you understand; then write it at the top of a fresh page in the “Writing Exercises” section of your notebook, and begin writing about it.

It's okay if you alter or wander off the topic after you have begun. Remember, there is no right or wrong with journal warm-ups, as long as you follow the prompt instructions. Let your mind go wherever it will and relax. Don't worry about whether what you write is bad or good or whether you are “doing it right.” The important thing is that you keep writing.

Example: Looking around my study, the first word I saw was on my bookshelf: “quadrant.” I know little about quadrants, so I scanned my other titles. The next word I saw was “beauty.” If I were to continue the exercise, I would then open my notebook and write “beauty” at the top of the page. After setting the timer, I would begin writing about the concept of beauty. My thoughts might travel in various directions on this topic. I might begin with a simple definition of what I think real beauty is and continue in that vein the whole way through. Alternatively, my reflection might turn a corner and become a story about a beautiful place I've visited or a critique of American standards of beauty or even an impromptu poem about something beautiful. The possibilities are wide open.

Introduction

As a kid, I both loved and despised writing. On one hand it was sheer joy...as long as I was left alone to follow my muse in my own way. In fact, I often preferred staying in the cafeteria to write during recess, while my classmates opted for the playground.

The joy I found in writing drained away in English class, though, the one place it should have been nurtured. In elementary school I enjoyed most of my assignments, because grades

did not yet matter to me and the work was usually fun. In junior high, however, that began to change, as the assignments became more difficult, more strictly evaluated, and less interesting. By the time I was in college, I found writing to be as much of a chore as my peers did. While my teachers sometimes gave creative freedom, too, their focus was on teaching us how to write with clarity, logic, and thoroughness.

I responded to this straitjacket by becoming a little like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Left to myself, I was free-spirited, whimsical, and confident on the page. In school, however, I became a slave to the rules of writing, always more focused on “doing it right” than on remaining true to my creative spirit. Any power my writing might have had was lost. Worse, as time passed, my playful side began to dry up, too, and I didn’t write as much for fun. It wasn’t that I no longer wanted to. I *couldn’t*. Regrettably, I was long out of college before I was able to overcome my writer’s block and enjoy myself again.

Lesson~The Two Natures of Writing

After looking back on my own experience, it is my hope that academic writing will be different for you. That is why I chose to spend a whole lesson on the topic. Before you settle down to study any major subject, it is important to consider the path before you and prepare yourself. Writing, in particular, should be approached with care, because it is so rich in power and possibility. Have you ever heard the saying, “The pen is mightier than the sword?” It’s true!

Those who wield the pen and know how to use it can change our world in ways the sword never can. While the sword can force change by placing the strong in positions of authority over the weak, the pen can move hearts and change minds. It can call people to action, lead souls to faith, educate the ignorant, fill minds with new ideas, and carry stories through time and space. In the hands of a masterful writer, the pen is a mighty tool.

So that you learn to make use of this tool yourself, it is important to understand that writing has two natures, and you need to be able to handle both well if you want to be a good writer. In the title to this lesson I mentioned “elbow grease” and “black berets.” To me, these are symbolic of these two natures. On the one hand, elbow grease stands for the “craft” of writing.



This includes its rules, structures, forms, and techniques. On the other hand, black berets—those oh-so-French little hats--stand for the “art” of writing, the creative and beautiful aspects that have the power to touch the world.



In writing, just as in any art, being attentive to both “craft” and “art” is necessary for producing excellent work.

Considering how negatively the “craft” of writing affected me in school, this may perplex you. Am I saying that my teachers were right to make me focus so much on all the rules of writing, the very ones that killed my creative spirit? Shouldn't they have simply left me alone to enjoy myself and figure out the craft on my own?

Perhaps...some people learn best by figuring things out for themselves, and some writers are indeed self-taught. But although writing is first and foremost an art, all artists—writers, actors, painters, violinists, etc.—must eventually make time to formally study the craft that undergirds their art. This is because each principle, each technique and form is a tool that artists can use to help them create the most beautiful art possible. Plus, once artists become skilled at using these tools and principles, they have the freedom to break the rules just enough to create something fresh and unique.

You are at the point in school where it is time to focus on studying the craft of writing for a while. As you move into higher levels of study, your ability to communicate and express yourself

well in writing will become increasingly important. Therefore, a word of warning: it could be easy to fall into the same trap I did. You may be tempted to make writing all about following the rules, never putting on your "black beret" at all. But don't! Even as you work to learn "the rules," seek to discover your own voice, to dig deep for original ways to express even mundane ideas, and to exercise your creativity within necessary boundaries.

Always remember that mastering a set of useful skills is not the ultimate purpose of writing lessons. We take the time for writing lessons so that when the opportunity arrives someday, we are ready to take up our pen, put on our black beret, and contribute something meaningful to our world.

Exercises

There is no exercise for this lesson, but please send me a scanned copy of your warm-up.

More information on this topic

- *Rip the Page! Adventures in Creative Writing*, by Karen Benke
- *Kids Write!: Fantasy & Sci-Fi, Mystery, Autobiography, Adventure, and More!*, by Rebecca Olien
- *Spilling Ink: A Young Writer's Handbook*, by Ellen Potter and Anne Mazer
- *Write Now! The Ultimate Grab-a-Pen, Get-the-Words-Right, Have-a-Blast Writing Book*, by Joe Rhatigan, Rain Newcomb, Veronika Gunter