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# UNIT 1: PAGE ONE The Very Beginning

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Welcome to *The Denim Beret*! I am so glad you will be working with me on your writing skills this year, and I hope that I will meet your expectations. The lessons in *The Denim Beret* are all about helping you develop the essential writing skills all excellent writers must have--without the frustration of busywork. Of course, all writing programs seek to build essential skills, but *The Denim Beret* is different from most in at least one important way. These lessons are designed to teach you how to approach writing the way professional writers do, with an eye towards technical excellence but also with artistic flair.

If you are not artistic, don't worry! This is not a creative writing course. By "artistic" I mean that you will learn to write with certain traits that will help you keep your writing from dying on the page from dullness. I will also help you learn how to approach your writing project with confidence and with close attention to those who may benefit from what you have to say. This requires a touch of artistry, but it is the kind of artistry anyone can learn.

In *The Denim Beret* I will take you through the writing process, teaching you techniques and skills along the way that will serve you for a lifetime in all types of writing. I am certain that almost every student who is willing to work at it can learn to write well. You may never become a published author, but you can learn to think

through ideas, organize them, and write them down in a clear, coherent, even stylish way. And although you may not be able to imagine it now, the rewards can be tremendous.

The first two skills I just mentioned—coming up with ideas and organizing them—you probably do naturally when speaking without thinking much about it. Have you ever told a story about something that happened to you? Have you ever explained how to do something? My bet is that you have expressed yourself in both of those ways and many more with both style and power. All you need to do, now, is learn how to express yourself well on paper, too.

This is not to say that there isn't a lot to learn. There is! And that is where I come in, so let's get started...

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# LESSON 1

## FIRST THINGS FIRST: Becoming an Active Reader

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Supplies: handout packet; pp. 2A and 2B handout; pen/pencil (not black). More supplies discussed in lesson.

Goal: to establish reading skills that will help the student comprehend and engage in texts of all genres with depth and accuracy.

Suggested Time: 5 sessions

Resource credits: *The Science Book: Everything You Need to Know About the World and How It Work*, by National Geographic Society; Holy Bible (King James Version); *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by William Shakespeare; *The Good Old Days: They Were Terrible!*, by Otto L. Bettman; *Treasure Island*, by Robert Louis Stevenson

## SESSION 1

### Introduction

This is not the very beginning lesson on how to write well. You had that one throughout your childhood when people who cared for you filled your mind with beautiful examples of language through stories, nursery rhymes, and poetry. This lesson, though, is the beginning of learning how to be a real writer, someone capable of expressing thoughts and ideas well on the page. The surprise for you is that this lesson is all about reading, for to become a good writer, you must first become a good reader.

I know, you didn't expect your first writing lesson to be a reading lesson. You may not even want any reading lessons or think you need any, because, after all, you are reading this *just fine*, thank you very much. My bet, though, is that you've never had a reading lesson like this before!

There are whole books on how to read skillfully, so that you can get the most out of any kind of literature that you read; thus, we can't go in depth with just one lesson and a few exercises. We can, however, establish one basic skill that will serve you well for years to come, both in your reading and writing ventures. The proper name for this skill is "annotating." For the moment, all that means is "quick and simple notetaking."

Learning how to make annotations is an important skill for several reasons. First, this skill forces you to become an *active* reader, which means that your mind is focused and truly engaged in the text. *Passive* reading means that your eyes take in the words, so that you can honestly say you are reading the entire text, but your brain isn't engaged. You may end up understanding and remembering some of what you read in passive reading, but you won't understand and remember nearly as much as you will if you read actively.

Another reason annotating is important is that it is a good way to begin learning how to take notes. Annotations include short, meaningful marks within the text (such as underlining) and brief notes and responses made either in the margins or on separate paper. If you can get into the habit of annotating your reading, you will likely find it easier to take more complete, detailed notes later. In high school notetaking skills become important for many classes, and they will become crucial if you go to college.

Third, annotating is a record of where you've been, footprints of your mind's many journeys. If you do it well, it becomes a kind of journal, and the more detailed you make your annotations, the more meaningful this journal will be. Someday you might enjoy looking back at your annotations to remember who you were at certain times in your life and how you experienced the literature you read.

Fourth, and most relevant for writing lessons, learning how to annotate can help you hone several skills essential for literary study: observing and remembering details, looking deeper for greater understanding, researching information, and participating mindfully in the silent conversation that takes place between the author and the reader.

Finally, annotating and other active reading skills can help you become a better writer. Let me repeat that, O writing student! *Annotating and other active reading skills can help you become a better writer.* These skills, if you practice them, can help you become more observant of the world around you, more detailed in your explanations and descriptions, more sympathetic toward your potential audience, and more aware of your need to connect with it clearly and meaningfully...

***End of sample***