

Quickwrites: How to Jumpstart Your Students' Thinking & Writing

Wisconsin State Reading Association Conference

6 February 2020 Linda Rief

Quickwrites mean showing students, and reading aloud to them, a short, usually whole piece of writing, from which they write anything that the piece brings to mind; or they borrow a line, from which they write, letting the line lead their thinking. This first draft writing lasts only 2-3 minutes. It is meant to free us from the self-censor that too often stops our writing.

“One line of a poem, the poet said—only one line, but thank God for that one line—drops from the ceiling. . .and you tap in the others around it with a jeweler’s hammer.”

Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, pp.77-78

“The simple rhythm of copying someone else’s words gets us into the rhythm (of writing), then you begin to feel your own words.”

William Forrester, *Finding Forrester*

“...because, for one thing, becoming a better writer is going to help you become a better reader, and that is the real payoff.”

Anne LaMott, *Bird by Bird*

“. . . doing a quickwrite is like riding the wave of someone else’s words, until you find your own.”

Ralph Fletcher, classroom visit, 2015

Benefits:

Bring Out the Writer

- give students ideas and frames for their own writing so they are not working in a void
- focus their attention and stimulate their thinking at the beginning of a class
- provide and capture the seeds of ideas for more expanded pieces
- encourage writing about important ideas: chosen to make us think and feel as we learn
- give students choices into what they write, how they write, and in deciding what works and does not work
- focus on one subject in greater detail, when given examples filled with sensory detail
- introduce students to a variety of stylistic devices and craft lessons they might try in their writing

Build Students' Confidence

- offer surprise, when students discover they didn't know what they knew or were thinking, until they began writing
- build confidence when students see the quality of their writing
- make writing accessible to all students, even those who struggle the most with words and ideas, because they gain confidence and competence precisely because of the limited expectations in space and time and the directions toward a specific task
(short, quick, and non-threatening)

Develop Fluency

- keep students writing several times a week
- keep students writing beyond the quickwrite when they find themselves committed to a topic that matters to them
- offer continual practice for writing on demand, or in timed situations, in sensible, realistic, meaningful ways

Bring Out the Reader

- teach students to become better readers as they hear, see, and craft language
- teach students critical reading as they choose significant lines, and then draft and reconsider their ideas in the clearest ways of communicating them
- provide examples of fine, compelling writing from their peers, their teacher, and professional writers
- introduce students to a variety of writers: poets, essayists, fiction and nonfiction writers

Teacher as Writer

- allow the teacher time to write for 2- 3 minutes each class period
- help us find ideas for writing and our voice as a writer
- clarify our understandings of the difficulty of the task in which we are asking students to engage, when we do what we ask them to do

Remembrance

For my grandmother

Clarice Smith Chapman, 1914- 1989

I remember... we collected wild strawberries
And made mud pies and built
Block houses and guided
Our cart down the supermarket aisle
And picked carrots and washed
Dishes and baked cookies and cut
Paper dolls and watched chickadees
And played checkers and ate scrambled eggs and
Took our time on the stairs
And you never told me you were dying.

I wanted the chance to say goodbye.

Lindsay O.

Try this:

- think of someone you care deeply about (they could still be alive) and using Lindsay's phrase "I remember...we..." and Lindsay's style linking one thing after another, write out the things you have done together, as quickly as you can for 2- 3 minutes
- write in the same way using the second person "you" instead of "we"
- borrow any line and write as quickly as you can all that that line brings to mind
- write out whatever this poem brings to mind for you

Professional Resources for Quickwrites:

- Buchwald, Emilie and Ruth Roston, Eds. 1987. *This Sporting Life- Contemporary American Poems About Sport and Games*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.
- Cisneros, Sandra. 1989. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Random House.
- Fletcher, Ralph. 1997. *Ordinary Things: Poems from a Walk in Early Spring*. New York: Atheneum Books.
- Gaige, Amity. 1990. *We Are A Thunderstorm*. Kansas City, Missouri: Landmark Editions.
- Gendler, J. Ruth. 1988. *The Book of Qualities*. NY: HarperPerennial.
- Heard, Georgia. 1995. *Writing Toward Home*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Janeczko, Paul. 1983. *Poetspeak: In their work, about their work*. New York: Bradbury Press.
- Knudson, R.R. and May Swenson, Eds. 1988. *American Sports Poems*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Lyon, George Ella. 2013. *Many-Storyed House*. Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press.
- Nye, Naomi Shihab. 1992. *This Same Sky- A Collection of Poems from around the World*. New York: Four Winds Press.
- Nye, Naomi Shihab, Ed. 1999. *What Have You Lost?* New York: Greenwillow Books.
- Rief, Linda. 2018. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rief, Linda. 2007. *Inside the Writer's-Reader's Notebook*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
(Students need a place to collect and build on their writing/reading ideas.)
- Rosenthal, Amy Krouse. 2005. *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Any poems, children's picture books, short essays, and vignettes that are language rich, strong in sensory imagery, evoke strong feelings, are thought-provoking, and students can relate to—are valuable as resources for quickwrites.

www.americanlifeinpoetry.org

The Writers Almanac- Garrison Keilor

Rambling Autobiography

I was born at the height of World War II just as Anne Frank was forced into Bergen-Belsen by the Nazis. I adore Brigham's vanilla ice cream in a sugar cone and dipped in chocolate jimmies. October is my favorite month, when the air turns green pear crisp. I roll down the car window and listen to the maples turn apple red and the oaks pumpkin orange. I bought my favorite jacket for a dime at the Methodist Church rummage sale. I have lied to my parents. With four high school friends I cut down a tree in the town forest for our Holiday Dance. I didn't know until the police arrived at the high school that each tree had been dedicated to a WW II veteran. I never read a book for pleasure until I was 38 years old. One of my students once leaned in to me in an interview and said, "My mother's having a baby; this is the one she wants." (Or—"I slipped through a diaphragm you know, but my parents still love me.") When I was 12 I set the organdy curtains in our bathroom on fire, playing with matches. My favorite place to hide was high in the maple tree in our front yard where I could spy on neighbors. I can still smell wet white sheets pulled through the ringer washer when I think of Grammy Mac. I dated Edmundo in high school because it angered my father. I fainted when I heard the sound of the zipper as the mortician closed the body bag holding my mother. I gave birth to twin sons. I once had dinner with Judy Blume. I am a teacher who writes. I want to be a writer who teaches....

Linda Rief

Try this (as specifically and as quickly as you can for 2-3 minutes)

- *Write your own "rambling autobiography." Let each new phrase take you in any direction.*
- *If one phrase tends to send you in a direction about one topic, jot down all that comes to mind about that topic.*
- *If you are stuck and not yet putting words on paper, start with one of my phrases "I was born at. . . I have lied to. . . One of my friends once said. . ." Change anything to make the writing yours.*

Teacher Note *Notice that each phrase could be developed into a more extended piece. Your students' rambling autobiographies will also be filled with possibilities. Saying "Tell me more about _____" helps them develop those ideas.*

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Excerpt from Chapter 2 from *The Running Dream* (Van Draanen)

I AM A RUNNER.

That's what I do.

That's who I am.

Running is all I know, or want, or care about.

It was a race around the soccer field in third grade that swept me into a real love of running.

Breathing the sweet smell of spring grass.

Sailing over dots of blooming clover.

Beating all the boys.

After that, I couldn't stop. I ran everywhere. Raced everyone. I loved the wind across my cheeks, through my hair.

Running aired out my soul.

It made me feel *alive*.

And now?

I'm stuck in this bed, knowing I'll never run again.

Try This (as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2-3 minutes):

- Write out anything this excerpt brings to mind for you.
- Think about something you are passionate about (something that “airs out your soul,” “makes you feel alive”) and write down everything that makes this activity so important to you.
- Start with the line “I AM A _____”, and fill in the blank, describing all that you do, think, feel, experience while doing this activity.
- Change the line to “I am not a _____”, expanding on all the reasons why you are not.
- Her last two lines say she will never run again. What has stopped you from doing something you love doing?

Teacher Note Notice the short, clipped sentences along with longer ones that give a cadence, or rhythm, to the piece, the way a runner might be getting into the rhythm of running and breathing. You could use this piece when looking at craft moves—especially length of sentences and layout on the page—and all they do for a reader.

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Ten Reasons Why Fathers Cry at Night

1. Because fifteen-year-olds don't like park swings or long walks anymore unless you're in the mall.
2. Because holding her hand is forbidden and kisses are lethal.
3. Because school was "fine," her day was "fine," and yes, she's "fine." So why is she weeping?
4. Because you want to help, but you can't read minds.
5. Because she is in love and that's cute, until you find his note asking her to prove it.
6. Because she didn't prove it.
7. Because next week she is in love again and this time it's real, she says her heart is heavy.
8. Because she yearns to take long walks in the park with him.
9. Because you remember the myriad woes and wonders of spring desire.
10. Because with trepidation and thrill you watch your daughter who suddenly wants to swing all by herself.

And Then You Know Kwame Alexander

Try This (as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2-3 minutes):

- Write out anything this poem brings to mind for you.
- Start with the phrase "Ten Reasons Why..." and fill in the blank with anything that comes to mind for you. Could be "why I... why you... why my little brother... why my dad..." and fill in with anything that causes strong feelings in you because of a relationship with someone else.
- Give ten reasons why you love (or dislike) a particular place or occasion or season or activity. The possibilities are endless!

The Boys in the Boat: "The Parts That Really Matter"

There is a thing that sometimes happens in rowing that is hard to achieve and hard to define. Many crews, even winning crews, never really find it. Others find it but can't sustain it. It's called "swing." It only happens when all eight oarsmen are rowing in such perfect unison that no single action by any one is out of synch with those of all the others. It's not just that the oars enter and leave the water at precisely the same instant. Sixteen arms must begin to pull, sixteen knees must begin to fold and unfold, eight bodies must begin to slide forward and backward, eight backs must bend and straighten all at once. Each minute action- each subtle turning of wrists- must be mirrored exactly by each oarsman, from one end of the boat to the other. Only then will the boat continue to run, unchecked, fluidly and gracefully between pulls of the oars. Only then will it feel as if the boat is a part of each of them, moving as if on its own. Only then does pain entirely give way to exultation. Rowing then becomes a kind of perfect language. Poetry, that's what a good swing feels like.

(Brown, *The Boys in the Boat*, p. 161)

Try This (as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2-3 minutes):

- Write out anything this excerpt brings to mind for you.
- Think about an activity in which you participate. What is there about that activity that is "hard to achieve and hard to define"? Try describing that thing. (It could be a sport, playing an instrument, drawing, even writing or reading. You can start with Brown's line "There is a thing that happens in _____")

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