



Changing life stories

# Playful writing games for KS3 and KS4

A National Literacy Trust membership resource

Thanks to Toby Jones for sharing some of his favourite games here.

Toby Jones, actor and writer, runs education workshops in which he empowers teachers to think of themselves as writers as well as teachers of writing.

## Contents

Introduction .....	1
Lists .....	1
Challenges .....	2
Disarray .....	2
Using the Senses .....	2
Around the School .....	3
Story Tips.....	4

## Introduction

With an emphasis on the playful and even the anarchic, these quick and easy activities will help teachers and pupils alike to free up their thinking and relax into language. They can be used with your peers in a workshop session or in the classroom as a precursor to writing.

## Lists

I'm a great fan of lists as a way of brainstorming, getting a lot of information quickly. It's always good to put a clock on list making.

List characteristics of someone in the room, of a famous person, or of a character from film or fiction. How long can you make your list before the person is recognised? This is a way of broadening descriptive vocabulary, but the characteristics must be objectively true.

Have pupils list an adjective for every letter of the alphabet, and then list a made-up adjective alongside. Even nonsense words can be descriptive.

Challenge the class to devise lists of things that are impossible to describe. Then swap the lists around and get each group to describe the impossible things they have been given. Marks for accuracy, yes, but also marks for creative inaccuracy. As they'll discover, nothing is impossible to describe.

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## Challenges

Get the class to fill bags or boxes with different kinds of words. Each box could have different kinds of words: adjectives, names, made-up words, verbs etc. Each pupil picks one word from each box and has to write a story using these words.

Challenge the class to a lying competition. Present them with a misdemeanor and get them to create elaborate, far-fetched excuses.

Challenge the class to describe nothing. Can they find ways to evoke silence, nothingness, emptiness or a blank piece of paper.

## Disarray

As if to emphasise the creative over the correct, have pupils try misspelling an entire short story or poem. What is the most elegantly misspelled phrase in the class? Remember: you have to know how to spell in order to mis-spell.

**Palimpsest:** hand out a photocopy of a page from a book or newspaper then encourage the writers to delete words to create a new story from what is left. Can they shift the genre of the story? Can they reverse the story's meaning? Can they make another story from the deleted words?

See how beautifully pupils can write when they are denied a certain letter: an 'e', for example. Then play a game where every word must have an 'e' in it. Watch how pupils stretch their vocabularies.

**Drawing with words:** this is a classic exercise of drawing or outlining the thing you are describing with the words you are using to describe it.

## Using the Senses

Have students describe a story as if they are seeing it as a film. They must imagine that the story is happening in front of them, coming towards them, or as if they are a camera pointed towards events. This oral exercise can be done in pairs and is a great way to get students to incorporate sensory detail into their narratives.

For example, picture yourself leaving your home at two o'clock in the morning. Describe your route, everything that you see in your path. Go on a journey being as precise as possible, as if your eyes are a camera recording everything you see in minute focus. 'I click shut the door and notice an empty crisp packet crumpled at my foot.' At a certain point, switch to someone or something else's perspective of your journey, as if a camera or a pursuer is describing your movement.

A photograph seizes a moment. Try to describe what happened in the split seconds before and after the photograph was taken. Assume that all the clues are in the picture.

**Hand out photocopies of a photograph:** in some ways the more banal the photo, the more interesting the answers will be. Tell the class that all they should assume that all the

answers are in the image. Encourage the class to describe (imagine!) the seconds before and after the photo was taken, then the minutes, then the hours, then the days, etc. Treat it like detection and no-one will realise that they are actually imagining!

You could then get them to do the same with the photographer, imagining their journey towards and away from the moment of snapping.

**Choose a piece of instrumental music:** imagine that the music is telling a very literal story. Consider the mood the music evokes, the kinds of places and events to which the music alludes. Begin to write the story that the music suggests.

It can help to have pupils lay their heads on their desks, close their eyes and enjoy the silence so that the piece of music has maximum effect when you play it. Don't mention the exercise until they've heard it once or twice then get them to write the story. The impact of video and soundtrack in our life means that invariably a story will already have run through their mind so it's just a question of putting it down on paper. See if there is agreement or disagreement about what the music might represent.

Try to describe smells and tastes in words but without using words such as sweet or sour that we normally associate with food. Begin to invent your own taste vocabulary ('a brownish, owly' taste) or new, invented words. Make the lesson into an event.

## Around the School

Everyone knows where to look for school notices, but try stories, poems or phrases in unexpected places. Get the site manager involved. Imagine the pleasure of discovering a couple of lines of poetry on the seat of your chair, or a short story on the back of a cupboard door.

Pin up a series of unconnected photos in different places round the school. Encourage writers move from photo to photo and link the story into a narrative. Tell the class that the photos are linked, and as before, they'll approach this imaginative task as detectives.

A huge piece of paper, long or tall or both, is hung in the school hall. Every member of the school is allowed to add a sentence to the emerging story until it covers the paper. The sentences must move the story forward. Think about the best place to hang the paper and provide quality pens that people will want to use.

Encourage a group of pupils to stage a crime scene for each other with props as clues. They don't really need to know what happened. Then another group writes the story of the crime that resulted in the scene.

Split the class into groups of five. Allocate a corner of the room and get them to "dress" or animate that corner with objects that they make or bring from home. They need to decide on a specific sequence of events that led up to the crime scene they have designed. The rest of the class becomes detectives examining the clues and writing up their conclusions.

## Story Tips

A good way of getting writers to move the story forward is to deny them describing words: adjectives and adverbs. But then there is another problem: quickly the characters are killed or die. It's important to discover what happens after death in a story.

Quick story development. Start thinking in threes: beginning, middle, end. Just write simple three part - or three beat - stories, as short as possible. Then encourage the writers to split the first beat into three so that the beginning has three beats, the middle has three beats and the ending has three beats. Then each of those beats has three beats. A beat can be anything: a sentence, a paragraph, an event, e.g.

*Gethin baked the most delicious bread in Wales. Other bakers became jealous of Gethin's fame and success. They ruined Gethin's business.*

Now return to the first sentence and break it into three:

*The people of St David's loved their local baker, Gethin Davies. He was obsessed with refining bread recipes. He dreamed of bread and woke with new ideas to improve his business.*

Then move onto the next sentence and break that into three, etc. Obviously the first three sentences need to be a huge story, probably bigger than this baking scenario, so as to allow for plenty of detailing.

**Story and Poetry Competitions:** provide a purpose for writing to increase pupils' motivation. Try thinking about more specific challenges: the smelliest story, the shortest story, the widest story, the pinkest story. Inevitably the pupils will try to win with the way they write but try getting them to focus on what they write, content not form.

**Worst Poem Competition:** they'll be really good! Once the poems are done get the class to vote and explain their vote. What makes a really bad poem? This will reveal what makes a really good poem - according to them.