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Taming the Beginning-of-the-Semester Teaching/Writing Jitters

You are standing at the front of a clinically white classroom facing 25 to 30 anxious faces. You fidget. They fidget. The air is thick with the smell of new books, chalk (or dry-erase pens), freshly sharpened pencils, and expectation. Aaah. . . a new semester begins. Except for the fact that you aren't completely naked, this scene resembles many people's worst nightmare.

But you've done this before, many times. (So have your students.) And yet the scene is fraught with tension every time for you and for them, too. Surely there must be a way to ease these "beginning-of-the-semester" jitters. After many repetitions of this scenario, I have found a way to quiet my nerves (and theirs) and create a good first impression, as well.

Some years ago, *Games* magazine created unusual photographs of everyday objects, called "Eyeball Benders." I cut these pictures into individual blocks and laminated them. Now I give one to each student, and tell them to figure out what common, everyday object is pictured. (These pictures also contain word clues, in the form of puns, such as "gutsy" for a close-up view of a tennis racket or "hooker" for a picture of a barrette.) After allowing a few minutes for examination, I call for volunteers to identify their objects. Then I ask them *how* they arrived at that answer. Many will say that they recognized the object, but others will mention the word "clues." After several students have spoken, I tell the others who cannot quite figure it out. Then I praise both those with keen eyes and those who used the word clues without being told, for they have demonstrated good thinking skills by looking for an alternate mode for solving their mystery. Students have just completed their first exercise in careful observation and critical thinking by using clues. I could have told them that to be a good writer one has to be a good observer, but demonstrating the principle works better.

Now students are ready to try a short writing exercise. (This is really a diagnostic essay to help me judge their entry-level writing ability, but I don't tell them. It would spoil the "fun" and turn it into an academic exercise.)

Descriptive Alien Exercise

- Pretend you are from another planet.
- Begin your writing with this sentence: "When my spaceship landed on Earth, I observed a most unusual sight."
- Now, think of a common, everyday activity and write the NAME of that activity at the top of your paper. (If you can't think of something within a minute or so, just go with "Driving a Car" or "Cooking" or some other activity you know well.)
- Describe that activity in as much detail as possible— from the point of view of an alien who does not understand what he/she/it is seeing. But DO NOT use any form of the words at the top of your paper in the description.
- After you have written as many descriptive details as possible (or I call "time"), end with one sentence that "wraps up" your ideas by commenting on what you saw, speculating about the purpose of this strange activity, or telling why this activity seemed weird to you.

Before students begin writing, I read them a humorous sample to model how it works. Here is what one student wrote the very first time I tried this activity in a writing class 15 years ago.

“Brushing Your Teeth”

“When my spaceship landed on earth, I observed a most unusual sight. From my perch at the top of a rectangle-shaped reflective object in a room with several white porcelain fixtures, I noticed a member of the human species. (Humans, it seems, are hundreds of times larger than Zotnicks, which is the name for creatures on my planet.)

As I watched this human, he started to engage in a most peculiar activity. After taking a slender object with bush-like projections on it from the reflective rectangle, he used it to attack a gaping hole on the upper part of his body. The weapon he used was about the size of two of our people placed end to end. For some unknown reason, the human seemed to want this tool to do great damage to the hole in his head because he used it with great force of an appendage. After awhile, he appeared to grow tired of this battle, though. My guess is that he did not like the activity any more because a huge quantity of foam started coming out of the wide opening at the top of his body. Then he splashed something on the orifice that had ejected the foam. It looked like a clear liquid that gushed out of a silver knob at the top of a bowl-like object. After that, he grabbed a cloth from a handlebar on the wall, wiped the upper tenth of his body that he had been assaulting all this time, and walked out of this place.

All I could think of was what a strange activity I would be able to report when I returned to the planet Zot!”

Conclusion

Students create funny, imaginative, and entertaining stories every semester. After they have finished, I ask a few volunteers who are especially pleased with what they have written to share their descriptions with the class. The other students act as good listeners by trying to guess the activity. Afterward, we discuss the specific details the writer used that serve as powerful clues.

Students are surprised to learn that all of them have just written their first essay for me. And it’s a good one! If they followed directions, their writings have an introduction (Step 1), a title (Step 2), a well-developed body (Step 3), and a conclusion (Step 4). So from this point forward, when students hear the word “essay,” they shouldn’t feel intimidated. After all, they know that they have already written one!

Not only is this activity fun, but it relieves the jitters of nervous students who walk into class thinking that they fear and hate the beast called “writing.” It’s a good way for us all to begin the semester.

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