



Snap and Write

PHOTO CREDITS: LEORA KRYGIER

HOW A DIGITAL CAMERA CAN HELP TEENS ENGAGE IN THE CREATIVE WRITING PROCESS

Teens and cameras are as ubiquitous as Starbucks these days. Teens snap pictures with their camera phones and digitals at school, parties, concerts—everywhere they go—and then immediately upload their photos onto **MySpace** and **Facebook**. That is precisely why a digital camera is a great tool to help students engage in the creative writing process.

Author and essayist Susan Sontag explained photography by saying, “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability.” Creative writing has that same quality; it is a lens into our humanity, a way of understanding our strengths, weaknesses, and motivations.

Photography has been a lightening rod in my own writing, whether for character development, grounding a scene, or as an alternative thinking process that guides me through a story. Some of the well-known building blocks of creative writing, such as theme, structure, point of view, characters, setting, conflict, internal monologue, dialogue, and metaphor, can be gently introduced via this interactive medium. These simple photographic activities can be assigned or suggested to teens to make the writing process less nebulous, more vivid, and relevant to their sensibilities.

PREMISE OR THEME

Look at the photos on your camera or computer.

SNAP: Use the zoom feature on your camera or computer software to enlarge the faces of friends and family. See expressions, hands, body language, and feet positions. What do these things tell you about this person? Now look closely at the photos. What do you now see in the background that you missed when you were shooting the photo? For instance, are there other people walking through? What are these people doing and how do they add to or detract from the photo?

WRITE: Answer the following questions in writing: Why and when did you take these photos? Do you only take your camera out on special occasions? How long has it been since you last took a photo? Look at each of your photos carefully. What did you include/not include? What is not in the photo that should have been? If you could shoot a do-over, how would you take that same photo today? After looking at your photos, think about what or of whom you photographed. Are they photos of

family, friends, nature, travel, or your pet? Write down three main “themes” that best describe your photographs.

CREATING STRUCTURE

Take a photo/writing journey to a place you already know.

SNAP: Start with what you know, that with which you are most familiar. Take your digital camera along with you to your favorite hangouts, such as a coffee shop, the library, a basketball game, your friend’s sleepover, a concert, or even laser tag. Observe how other people sit, walk, stand in line, and enter or exit a doorway. Notice how every person moves a little differently? Bring your camera to school or work (with permission). Take photos of your workstation, office, classroom, or schoolmates. Ask yourself what the people in your photos were doing a second before you snapped your photograph? What were they doing after? Then choose one location and take fifty photos. Do not self-edit or censor as you shoot.

WRITE: When you return home, write down the things you now see that you didn’t notice as you were taking the photos. Choose your ten best photos and put them into a sequence. It can be chronological or otherwise. Write down the sequence of your photos and why you chose to order them this way.

SCENE SETTING AND GROUNDING YOUR READER

Take your camera to a place you think is photo-worthy.

SNAP: There’s a long-established notion that photographs are taken on special occasions like birthdays and vacations, or at photo-worthy locations. Bring along your camera to such an occasion, or to a city park, an architectural monument, museum, flea market, sports venue, antique store, beach, zoo, lake, or any other place you believe is special. Choose a location



BY INCLUDING THE BACKGROUND, THE VIEWER GAINS INSIGHT THAT THIS MAN IS A FIGURINE ON SALE AT A LIQUIDATOR STORE.

WHEN LOOKING AT THIS PHOTOGRAPH, ONE MIGHT ASK WHO THIS MAN IS AND WHAT HE IS DOING.



and a person—first take a close-up of that person, and then take the exact same shot but this time include the background. Think about what important information or insight the background gives viewers that they would not have in a close-up.

WRITE: Write down why you believe the place is “photo-worthy.” Is it because of the people, the special occasion, the architectural lines, or details of the buildings? What are people doing that make them photo-worthy? How do they interact? Is there something about the place or setting that makes them behave differently? (What you are doing is “grounding” your reader as to where the story is taking place.)

CONFLICT

Take the camera to places you think are not photo-worthy.

SNAP: Think of this task as a photographic problem and try to overcome your usual way of thinking. A dull car wash might produce a water-soaked vista; the supermarket might provide the graphic on soup cans; and an industrial area might show lonely, barbed-wire fencing. Other locations—freeway overpasses, electronics stores (think walls of flickering TVs), bus stations, railroad stations (think curling RR tracks), cemeteries, gas stations, or empty parking lots—might make fascinating photos. Look for the beauty or ugliness in the mundane, everyday objects and places—a crushed soda can, a city sewer cover, electrical poles, a post office, etc. Find the ironies, for example, a “no-trespassing” sign juxtaposed with people.

ALTHOUGH A CRUSHED SODA CAN IS SEEMINGLY NOT PHOTOWORTHY, IT CAN MAKE FOR AN INTERESTING PICTURE WHEN SURROUNDED BY THE BEAUTY OF NATURE.



WRITE: Write down how you feel when you are forced to think outside of your usual box in order to solve a problem. Are you upset? Invigorated? Overwhelmed? A problem or “conflict” is what makes the story a page-turner. This exercise will help you isolate your main character’s problem. How is he solving or not solving

it? What will she do to resolve her problem? Will he overcome his problem? Do you want her to?

DIALOGUE

Be a tourist.

SNAP: Find a bus tour in your city. Gain new perspective about this city where you live, study, and work, the city you think you already know and take for granted. Take photographs of important sights like tourists would but think about how your photographs might be different from theirs. Take photos of the people on the bus as well, and then pay close attention to their conversations. What are the tones of their voices? Animated? Excited? Do they use their hands when they speak? What languages do they speak? What other life experiences do they bring to the sights they see? How is a first-time traveler experiencing the city differently from a seasoned traveler?

WRITE: Write down your experiences as a tourist in your own town. Describe how it feels to step into someone else’s shoes; get into their heads and see your world through fresh eyes. (It’s something a writer must do to express someone else’s point of view, language, and way of speaking.)

POINT OF VIEW

Go to three photography exhibits.

SNAP: Find three photography exhibits or visit the library and borrow three books by different photographers. See how these different artists tell their stories. What sets the mood? What did they include/exclude in their photographs? Ask yourself how the photographer used lighting? Was it natural or artificial? How did she frame the photo? Is it a landscape photo or a portrait? As a viewer, how do you respond to a long shot? How do you feel when you see something small, magnified? How do color and size add to or interfere with the photograph?

THE REFLECTIONS IN THIS STORE WINDOW MAKE THE PHOTOGRAPH MORE INTERESTING THAN AN ORDINARY IMAGE OF A MANNEQUIN.



WRITE: Choose your favorite photograph. Describe it, as the photographer who took it might have described it. Then write down how the other two photographers might have shot the photo differently. Would they have used differing techniques if they shot the same photo?

CHARACTERS

Be your family chronicler.

SNAP: Take on the role of family chronicler. Bring your camera to a party, anniversary, or other family occasion. When you frame your photo, remember that the object doesn’t have to be centered to make for an interesting shot. Try positioning the main subject of your photo to the side. See how the subject relates to other objects in the photo rather than taking up the

entire frame. (This exercise will help show that readers don't always want to learn about a character dead-on, but rather from how they interact with others.) Go to your attic or basement and find old family photographs of your grandparents, great grandparents, old family homesteads, and such. Find out as much as you can about these people. Think about their life stories. What are your connections to them? Are there any resemblances to you or your siblings?

WRITE: Chose two family members as potential characters in a story. Write your own description of each one, and then write how each of them would describe themselves or something that occurred at a family gathering.

INTERNAL MONOLOGUE

Take photos of yourself.

SNAP: Turn the camera on yourself and snap away. Experiment with holding the camera at various angles—up high, at arm's length, and from below. Take photos of yourself in the morning, noontime, and evening. See how different you appear during various times of the day.

WRITE: Answer these questions: Do you like or hate having your picture taken? Are you self-conscious when your photo is taken? Do you look away or look straight at the camera? Do you have one side of your face that you prefer to show in a photo? Do you like to stand or sit down when your photo is taken? Do you blink when a flash is used? Do you like to stand behind other people in a group shot, or do you like to be out in front? Later look at your self-portraits and pretend the person is not you. What does the photograph tell you about the person in the photo? (These questions will help you identify your own internal monologue, and, in turn, they will help you construct a character's internal monologue—what a character is thinking as events in the story unfold.)

METAPHOR AND SYMBOLS

SNAP: Take your camera to a location you have used in a previous exercise, but this time shoot only objects or situations you think might be "symbolic." Be aware of reflections when you are shooting—mirrors, store windows, water, etc. Very often, a reflective point of view is more interesting than the object or

person. Street signs too, make very good points of interest in a photo, much the same way an object can be an important focal point or metaphor in a scene. Take

IMAGES IN MIRRORS BECOME THEIR OWN METAPHORS, SUCH AS THIS SCENE THAT MAKES A MASSIVE CITY SUDDENLY LOOK TINY.



your camera out on a cloudy or rainy day. If you are shooting indoors, open a window or a door and notice the light that comes in at certain times of the day. Do you have blinds or curtains? Just like an old film noir movie, use them to your advantage. Flickering TVs and computer monitors are also great backdrops.

WRITE: Identify the metaphors in everyday objects and write down as many symbols and metaphors as you can from your photos. Stairs, for example, make great, clean line backdrops and speak to our ups and downs. A crushed soda can is a metaphor for the feeling of being overwhelmed. Blurry photos also make excellent metaphors, hinting at unfocused feelings and a sense of confusion. Clouds produce atmosphere and can be more interesting than a plain, blue sky.

WRITE, WRITE, WRITE

Choose your worst photo and a writing assignment you have been struggling with and place them side by side. Cut up the photo and make it into a photo collage. Then revisit your writing assignment and highlight the passages you like. Cross out the passages you dislike. Remember that one good paragraph—or even one good sentence—can be a springboard for "re-shooting" your writing assignment.

Helping teens learn the creative writing process is no easy teaching assignment. But it's helpful to turn to one of the most important principles of fiction and the stock advice given to all budding writers—"show, don't tell." This principle counsels us to write in a way that allows the reader to experience the story through characters, actions, thoughts, senses, and feelings, rather than exposition or explanation. Similarly instead of focusing on the mechanics and telling teens how to write, these photo/writing exercises should aid in showing your teens a way to expand and excite their inherent, nascent creativity.



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