

Writing Spaces

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What Is Writing Like for You? Using Metaphors to Explain Writing and Writer's Block Experiences in First-Year Writing

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What is Writing Like for You? Using Metaphors to Explain Writing and Writer's Block Experiences in First-Year Writing

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Overview

This activity about writing metaphors is ideal for the first 1-2 weeks of the term and was originally developed for a first-year writing course.

Students often struggle to talk about writing and their challenges with the writing process. They use statements such as “I don’t like writing,” “I’m bad at explaining things,” or “writing is just so hard” to describe their experiences because they may not feel confident to use writing vocabulary, such as audience, voice, evidence, and organization to identify their specific challenges. This activity responds to those challenges through a guided reading and discussion of E. Shelley Reid’s “Ten Ways To Think About Writing: Metaphoric Musings for College Writing Students.” Reid’s article not only provides an accessible way to introduce scholarly research to students, but she also uses metaphors like the green ball and lost money to explain the role of description and audience in college writing (6-10). As a result, students’ conversations about this article help them develop their writing vocabulary to better communicate their strengths and struggles with writing. In addition, because Reid’s purpose is to help college students learn to write, the metaphors and strategies in this article help students understand the expectations of college writing early on.

Furthermore, the “metaphor workshop” part of this activity helps

students build community with their peers and instructor. Students may feel alone in their struggles with writing; however, the creation and sharing of writing metaphors shows students that their peers have similar struggles. They also build community by referencing their peers by name when they identify metaphors they connect with (i.e. “I really like [Name]’s metaphor because...” Doing this helps students develop a strong sense of belonging in the classroom, which helps build the relationships and trust necessary for activities like peer review, individual conferences, and other group work. After completing this activity, students will build the vocabulary and confidence to describe their writing experiences to their peers and instructor, thus deepening their knowledge of the writing process.

Time Commitment

35-40 minutes

Materials

Students should have access to digital or printed copies of E. Shelley Reid’s “Ten Ways to Think About Writing: Metaphoric Musings for College Writing Students” that they read prior to class and can consult during this activity. The instructor should have access to a digital or printed copy of Reid’s article during class. Also, the instructor will need a collaborative writing space like a whiteboard or digital document to write and share metaphors in class.

Activity Process

- Students will prepare by reading Reid’s article before coming to class . It is also recommended that they complete a short discussion post to reflect on their reading prior to participating in this activity. The author has used Question, Comment, and Connection Discussion Posts (Imirie). In this style of discussion post, students respond to the reading by generating a discussion question, providing a comment

about one of the main points in a reading, and connecting what the student has read to a personal experience or a previous reading (Imirie). This style of discussion post encourages students to thoughtfully reflect on the main ideas they have read and create three possible ways to contribute to in-class discussions. However, there are other ways to approach these discussion posts. Students could respond to questions such as “Reid begins her article with the statement ‘writing is hard’ (3). What do you think about this opening? Why would she begin her article this way?” or “What do you already believe about how to write in college? Do you think Reid would agree with you? Why or why not?” The purpose of the discussion posts is to encourage students to reflect on what they learned from the reading and how they are connecting these ideas to their experiences. Instructors could also use some of the questions in the following steps in discussion posts to prepare students for these in-class conversations more directly.

- First, students will begin their discussion of Reid through a whole class discussion defining metaphors and explaining why people might use metaphors when they talk or write. This first discussion should be approximately 5 minutes long. Students may define metaphors broadly as “using a simple example to explain something more complicated,” or they may be more specific by discussing metaphor use in literature or poetry. All of these definitions of metaphor can be useful, though encouraging a broader definition is generally more helpful for the next steps of the activity. Instructors should also encourage students to reflect on the use of metaphor by asking the class questions such as “Why do we use metaphors? Why are they helpful for explaining complicated ideas?” Students may offer answers like making a complicated idea more clear or relatable to someone else. Answers like these will prepare students for the metaphor workshop by demonstrating that metaphors are used to connect different people’s experiences (in this case,

experiences with writing)..

- Next, students will transition to a 5-7 minute small group discussion about Reid's article. Instructors should encourage at least one student in each group to take notes on the discussion, so all groups are ready to report back to the whole class. It is also recommended that discussion questions are either written on the board or projected on a projector screen so all students can easily access the questions. The following discussion questions can be used: "Which of Reid's metaphors were more helpful for understanding the writing process and why," "What metaphors confused or challenged you and why," "How does Reid's article connect to other conversations we have had about writing in this class," and "What did you learn about college writing from this article?" There are also provided discussion questions at the end of the article which could also be used (Reid 22-23). The goal of this discussion is that students examine the metaphors that they personally connected to which will prepare them to write personal metaphors during the metaphor workshop. In this conversation, students should also be discussing college writing more broadly and what new writing terminology they learned or how they understand the writing process better.
- Students will then transition to a 5 minute whole class conversation in which each group summarizes their discussions to their peers and instructor. The purpose of this brief whole class discussion is to establish common themes in the class for what makes a writing metaphor helpful or confusing. For example, many students may explain that the little green ball metaphor is very helpful for their understanding of writing (Reid 6-8). Instructors should invite further conversation about why one or multiple groups found this metaphor helpful. Common reasons may include the little green ball is a common object that most people are familiar with, so other writers will be able to

relate to the metaphor more. Students may also say that they have trouble explaining exactly what they mean in their writing, so the little green ball metaphor shows them the importance of being descriptive in their writing. As a result, students should identify strategies for developing their own metaphors, such as choosing objects/scenarios that are familiar to a general audience. These are strategies they can apply during the metaphor workshop.

- After examining Reid’s metaphors and evaluating their effectiveness in detail, students will be ready to develop their own metaphors for writing and experiences with writer’s block. The instructor should write the following prompts on a whiteboard, chalkboard, or a shared digital document projected on a screen: “Writing is like...” and “Having writer’s block is like...” Students must develop a metaphor for one of these prompts; however, the instructor may encourage students to answer both to have a variety of responses. This step should be approximately 8-10 minutes so students can have enough time to decide on a prompt and write and revise their metaphor until they are ready to share it.
- The instructor will then ask students to share their metaphors while writing the responses on the board so everyone can see them. Students may write sports-related metaphors, such as “having writer’s block is like striking out every time you step up to bat. I try to write, but every time I try, I just can’t seem to get the words down on paper the way I want them.” Students may also compare their writing process to riding a rollercoaster, cooking a meal for an important guest, or exploring an unfamiliar hiking trail. For variety, each student should share at least one metaphor. This step should take 3-4 minutes to complete.
- After the instructor has finished writing the metaphors on the board, students will select a metaphor that a peer created

that they agree with, find interesting, etc. Students will then explain how their peer's metaphor helps them understand the writing process or experiences with writer's block in an alternative way. For example, for the sports-related metaphor above, a student may say "I really liked Sarah's metaphor about writer's block being like striking out. I play softball too, so I know how frustrating it is to keep striking out despite how hard you're trying. I feel like I understand Sarah's experiences with writing better now that I've seen her metaphor. I also think that I could use this metaphor to describe my own experiences with writer's block too." Students may need support to provide a detailed answer like this one. Instructors can prompt students to explain if their peer's scenario (baseball, cooking, hiking, etc.) is one that they have experience with too. Students can then share how this familiarity helps them understand the details of the metaphor. This encourages students to think about deeper connections with their peer's work beyond statements like "I just find it relatable" or "It makes sense to me." Once finished, these 5-7 minute conversations will complete the activity.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Define metaphors and explain their usefulness to conversations about writing
- Connect scholarly research to their own experiences about writing
- Create metaphorical language to describe writing and writer's block experiences

Learning Accommodations

- For small group discussion, students can delegate group member responsibilities, such as note-taker, group reporter, etc., to support their strengths in different forms of participation.
- To further accommodate different forms of participation, the instructor can create a shared digital document before class that students can use to respond to questions, create their metaphors, etc.
- Reid's article should be available digitally for ease of access and note-taking purposes. Providing this article in the learning management system or a link to the article on *Writing Spaces* may be most effective.
- This activity can also be adapted for an asynchronous course through discussion board activities for the metaphor workshop. Students can then engage with their peers digitally to identify which of their peer's metaphors connects with them the most and why.

Works Cited

- Reid, E. Shelley. "Ten Ways to Think About Writing: Metaphoric Musings for College Writing Students." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, edited by Charley Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, vol. 2, Parlor Press, 2011, pp. 3-23, <https://writingspaces.org/past-volumes/punctuations-rhetorical-effects/>.
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[discussion-posts/](#).