

Writing to Explore with Peter Lourie



Activity Guide

Writing about Rivers

ACTIVITY 1: Writers often go to places to describe them. Pick a place along a river, or in a watershed, that you can get to. Go there. Spend some time listening, looking, just being quiet. Now write out the scene, paying attention to details. When you return home, revise this scene into one paragraph. Throw out anything that does not contribute to the scene. Selection of detail is the most important job of a writer. What details did you leave out? What details must you include to create the scene? Now put the paragraph away, and in a few days try writing the same scene purely from memory. What happens?

ACTIVITY 2: On my journey through Brazil's Amazon jungle I was deeply impressed and concerned about the changes people were making to the Amazon watershed's rain forests as they chopped and burned the trees to grow crops. How do people use natural resources in your watershed? See if you can find and interview people doing these activities. Are there any problems caused by those activities? Are people active in improving problems caused by past or current land-use activities? If you talk to people involved in activities that may be harmful to the environment, can you see reasons why they might be doing those activities even if they are harmful?

Researching Your Watershed

Start a reading list: what articles and books should you read to know about your watershed? Start a list of river people to interview. Ask around to find out who catches the most fish, the biggest fish. Ask who the local historians are. Ask whose families have lived the longest in those parts. Ask if there are any ghost stories associated with the watershed. Ask about buried treasure. Ask how things have changed in recent years. Ask what it was like in the old days. Ask about any strange events. Ask for other experts' names, and then ask those people for more names. Before you know it, you will have plenty of answers and fresh questions. And a huge growing list of river experts.

If you do this for a number of days, even in one tiny area of a river, you will soon become an expert yourself. You'd be surprised how quickly information zooms into your head and becomes a part of your soul. Also, curiosity has a life of its own. I didn't like the Hudson River before I canoed it. It was polluted and big, and dangerous for small boats. But after studying it—even before my journey—after researching it (reading Hudson River books

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and talking to people up and down the watershed), I began to love it. Now it's one of my favorite rivers, and that's because the more you come to know something, or someone, the more you can appreciate it, him/her.

Writing a Watershed Journal

Find one character who lives in your watershed, someone who really interests you. Pick someone whose personality or career reflects something about the watershed itself. Describe that person and also describe the place where you first met him or her. See if you can capture some of this person's words in conversation. And then try to put it all together into a portrait that says something about the watershed, the person, and the times in which we live.

General Story Writing

Talk to your grandfather or grandmother. See if you can get them to tell you an important story. It should be a story they have told over and over, one they love to tell. Write it down. Keep it simple, keep it to the bare bones. In your version of the story, only tell what needs to be told.

Writing from the Jungle

Try writing a "Jungle e-mail" from the depths of your own watershed to the outside world. Pretend that your communication lifeline to the rest of the world is your e-mail system--do you have any interesting experiences or information about the rivers that flow past your door that you'd like to share? Can you make up a story about an adventure into the backwaters of your watershed?

Record Your Observations

STEP #1 - Keep a journal on a tape recorder. Make a small journey somewhere within your watershed. Perhaps to a river? Or a dam? Or even the stream behind your house. But this journey might be as simple as walking down the street after school. Observe details--sounds, sights, smells. Make notes by speaking into a recording device. If you don't have a tape recorder, then use a small notebook. Record a conversation perhaps with someone you meet along the way. The important thing is to let yourself record anything and everything. This will be rough material for a finished piece later.

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STEP #2 - Back home, listen to the tape, or review your notes. Now transcribe (from the Latin, scribere, "to write") those notes. Write the notes out in full sentences. Expand these notes using your memory. Don't edit. Later you will select, shorten, revise.

STEP #3 - Now take all your notes and turn your journal into a finished piece of writing. Try focusing on one aspect of your journey/interview and expand the detail of this portion. The finished piece of writing should be only one or two pages.

Writing in Class

ACTIVITY #1 - Write a story quickly, without editing yourself. Now hand it into a teacher or classmate. Get that person's comments on how to make the story more effective. Then rewrite the story paying attention to his or her comments and to any ideas you yourself have for making it a more effective story. Now read the two versions back to back. Read them out loud, the first one first, the second one second. See any difference? How many times do you think you could rewrite the same story and still make it better? When do you think the process of rewriting might start to make it less effective?

ACTIVITY #2 - Take five nonfiction books out of the library. Compare and contrast each with the other. Try to determine how the writer approached the writing of each book. How might each approach have differed from the others?

What adventure would you like to write about? And how would you go about the long process of research, adventure and journal-keeping, drafting, revision and publication of that book?

Idea Starters

1. Pretend you are going on a river adventure. Pack Your Bag. What would you pack for your specific journey?
2. Pretend that you have gone on a river adventure in a canoe. Design a picture postcard and write a brief note to a friend about your trip...
3. Pretend you are a journalist for a local newspaper....

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