

I Imagine: *Creative Writing, Memories, and the Five Senses*

Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

This writing activity will encourage participants to recall a memory and describe it through creative writing using all five senses. The activity will be lead by an instructor. Participants can work on the project individually, in a group, or with family members. To encourage the recollection of memories, participants should be asked to bring photos to class and the instructor will refer to the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* for further inspiration. If time and budget permit, aromatic items such as herbal teas, coffee, spices, essential oils, or wildflowers can be distributed to aid in the recollection of memories. Writers, poets, English teachers, activities coordinators, or volunteers can direct the lesson plan. In addition, if the participants have difficulty in manipulating pencils or pens, several people should be present to help them write.

TIME:

One to two hours over one session (depending on how quickly the instructor moves through the discussion and examples).

MATERIALS:

- Writing utensils
- Paper/attached handout
- Personal photos (prior to the meeting, ask participants to bring personal photographs depicting celebrations, vacations, or holidays—not portrait-like images—to the session)
- Aromatic items, such as herbal teas, coffee, spices, essential oils, or wildflowers
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*
- Audible items, such as recordings of sounds of nature or music like that of the recording *On the Edge of the Wind*, produced by the North Dakota Council on the Arts

"THREE PLAGUES" (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

The ability to complete this writing project with family members or friends can combat the loneliness that many people face in elder care facilities. The element of boredom is addressed through the creative writing process and through the act of recalling and recounting past experiences. If some participants have lost certain senses, they will discover that they can still take part in the activity through their remaining senses. For instance, if a participant's sight is impaired, he or she can listen to nature sounds or smell essential oils to jog a memory. This addresses the sense of helplessness. Audible stimuli, taste, and smell all are powerful flints for sparking or jogging memories.

This activity can be taken a step further to encourage community if the instructor gathers the written memories and redistributes them. This extra step can spark conversation about other people's life experiences, open the writing up to interpretation, and can even inspire other art projects. Again, a sense of loneliness and boredom is addressed through this action.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

"Folk wisdom dictates that odours [sic] are especially powerful reminders of autobiographical experience, an effect which has become known as the Proust phenomenon. This paper reviews the relevant literature to determine whether there is any substantive evidence to support this view. . . . From these data, there is at least preliminary evidence that olfactory stimuli can cue autobiographical memories more effectively than cues from other sensory modalities." [Abstract]

This article not only found that a person's sense of smell could cue autobiographical memories more effectively than cues from other sensory experiences, it states that the memories cued tend to be more vivid, emotional, and old.

--*Chu, Simon, and John D. Downes. "Odour-evoked Autobiographical Memories: Psychological Investigations of Proustian Phenomena." Chemical Senses 25, no. 1 (2000): III-II6.*

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (1 TO 2 HOURS):

1. The person directing this activity plan can start by explaining what creative writing is through examples of well-known authors and different types of creative writing. Creative writing is any piece of writing that expresses thoughts, feelings, and emotions, rather than simply conveying information. Examples of creative writers are Agatha Christie, Ernest Hemingway, Judy Blume, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Some examples of creative writing include poetry, plays, novels, song lyrics, screenplays, or prose.

It is also helpful to generate conversation in the beginning of the class. One option is to go around the room and ask the participants to explain their relationships with writing. Have they written creatively before? Did they ever keep a journal? Do they still keep a journal? Were they a journalist or a teacher? Have they written poetry, recipes, lists, or songs? This initial dialogue can help the group to feel at ease, while also realizing there are many forms of creative writing and writers.

2. Once the conversation has subdued, the person directing the activity plan can explain the day's creative writing task, which is to recall a memory using all five senses. The person directing the activity plan should explain that good writing includes descriptions of a variety of senses, and that this element of writing allows for readers to experience vivid mental images.

3. Refer to the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* to provide examples of the five senses that show up in writing and storytelling. There are many examples in the book, but here are a few suggestions:

- Sight: “3. He Could See Nothing” on page 60, “19. The Girl in the Storm” on page 73, “58. Eagles and Hawks” on page 147
- Sound: “The Powerful Lake” on page 46, “30. Why Coyotes Howl” on page 239
- Smell: “20. Lard & Pepper” on page 171, “21. How Not to Smell Like a Human” on page 237
- Taste: “14. A Sulfur Cure” on page 170, “50. More Chicken Soup” on page 219
- Touch: “18. If Only . . .” on page 73, “40. Hot as You Can Stand It” on page 177

4. After reading an entry from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, ask the participants to identify different senses that appeared in the text. When they identify what sense is referred to in the text, ask if they have another example of a sentence that contains the same sense. For example, one participant may say the story refers to our sense of smell. Ask the participant, or anyone, to come up with his or her own sentence that refers to smell.

Example of a sentence someone could come up with regarding the sense of smell:

“She breathed in deeply, as the sweet aroma of fresh-cut pine always reminded her of winter and Christmas.”

5. Once the participants have a good idea of the five senses in writing, start the writing project. If participants have a photo, ask them to refer to their photo and describe the memory of that moment using five senses. Explain that this can be done in a straightforward manner with exactly five sentences. Or they can be as creative as they like, as long as they capture the five senses. (See the last page for a worksheet that can be handed out to participants.)

6. If participants do not have a photo, ask them to remember a moment or think of or imagine a photo in their mind. Another option is to provide additional writing prompts, such as aromatic items like herbal teas, coffee, spices, essential oils, or wildflowers. Audible items like recordings of nature sounds and flute music like that in the North Dakota Council on the Arts' recording *On the Edge of the Wind* can be used. Once the participants have smelled, tasted, or listened to something, ask them if the experience reminded them of anything. If so, they can write about that memory using all five senses. If the participants have difficulty recalling memory, phrase the question differently. Ask them to close their eyes and describe what image comes to their mind. The participant can write about the image generated by stimulating that sense of hearing, smell, or taste. The participants could also write about their current surroundings or

be encouraged to make something up completely, which is another fun element of creative writing.

7. Once everyone has finished writing, ask the group if they would like to share what they have written. If no one feels brave, sometimes it helps when the person directing the activity plan shares first. It also can be helpful to ask if they would like someone else to read what they have written. This exercise is great for generating conversation. If the participants wish, the images along with the creative writing inspired by them, could be displayed somewhere publicly for other people to look at and read before the images and writings are returned to their owners. This would create interest in the elders to get out of their rooms to read the materials and look at the pictures, while also providing a source of personal interaction and communication.

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Lauren is a writer and storyteller who earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from St. Olaf College. She is currently working as a communications consultant for SURVIVEiT, a nonprofit that provides online resources to cancer patients. She also mentors elementary children in an after-school program for New Americans. In her free time, she enjoys volunteering as a writer and copy editor for the *High Plains Reader* and teaching creative writing at the YWCA in Fargo, North Dakota. She lives in Moorhead, Minnesota, with her husband Jamison, Kingsley the black lab, and LeBron the cat.

This is the handout that can be photocopied (enlarged if necessary), distributed, and used to facilitate the creative writing exercise:

Memories and the Five Senses

I hear _____

I see _____

I smell _____

I taste _____

I touch _____

Examples:

I taste mint as I press my toothbrush to my tongue and
I can still hear your familiar laugh bouncing off the bathroom walls.

I see your blue eyes as you turn around to face me.

I smell face lotion and toothpaste as you pull me in for a hug goodnight.

I touch my heart and miss you more.

I Imagine

As I press my nose into the cold fabric and inhale, the icy smell of gasoline and snow calms me. I breathe deeper and can almost feel your strong embrace. I remember when you would make us warm *lefse* with cinnamon-sugar. I can almost taste the salty butter and feel the crunch of sugar between my teeth. I can hear your voice as you ever so patiently read *The Berenstain Bears* to me over and over again. I see how your brown eyes, which mirror my own, are now accompanied by lines of a life lived well. A flicker of fear seizes my heart when I imagine you older or not at all. I push the thought away and hug you in hopes of keeping you here.