Staring at a blank sheet of white paper, doodling in the margins, studying the slow movement of the hands on the clock, sneaking a look at a classmate’s paper—we’ve all watched students fidget when they were unable to transfer their ideas into words on the page, or even to come up with the ideas. The activities in this chapter will stimulate creative thinking and help your students express their thoughts in clear, precise language. Included are ideas that will encourage students to improve their fluency, use persuasive language, create dialogue for their characters, and step beyond their focus on themselves to recognize the impact that others have had on them.

Exercises for Fluency

At the beginning of each school year I engage my students in a series of mini-lessons that plant the seeds and provide the tools for writing. Upon completion of these writing-readiness activities, my students have an “I can write” attitude. Though I use these activities with elementary students, they’re useful and stimulating exercises that could be effective at any age and could be particularly helpful with ESL students or students who need additional practice using descriptive language.

How much time you spend on each of these exercises depends on the needs and the age of your students. I generally spend 15 to 30 minutes on each lesson and teach them sequentially over a period of two to three weeks.

Rush, Rush, Rush (Part 1)

Rush, Rush, Rush is intended to create fluency in writing. The goal is quantity, not quality.
1. One student selects an object from a boxed collection I have assembled. That object becomes the writing topic for the entire class.

2. Students spend three minutes individually writing lists of words and phrases that come to mind when thinking about the selected object.

3. When time is up, students count the entries on their own lists and record the total at the top of the list. (The fact that we count and tally our words helps motivate students to write quickly and think of as many words as possible.)

4. Students then look for one word or phrase from their own list that they think no one else in the classroom has thought of.

5. Students share their selected words and phrases. Sometimes we comment on an unusual or unexpected word or a word that everyone has used.

6. I repeat this activity several times. The collected objects I’ve used have ranged from a piece of candy to a pillow. The possibilities are endless.

Rush, Rush, Rush (Part 2)

This extension of the first exercise also seeks fluency, but this time students are asked to write sentences rather than words.

1. One student selects one item from the box to be a writing topic for the class.

2. Students spend three minutes individually writing sentences about the item.

3. Students count their sentences and write the total at the top of the page.

4. Students select their favorite sentence to read aloud and tell why they like it.

5. I repeat this activity several times.

Words Come Alive

This exercise helps students learn how to choose vivid words instead of overused, trite words.

1. Students form small groups for this activity.

2. I give each group an index card that has a “plain” word written
on top. Plain words are overused words such as good, beautiful, said, went, nice, happy, etc.

3. Students replace each plain word with a more descriptive, vivid word. Each group brainstorms alternate words and writes them on a sheet of poster board.

4. Each group shares their words with the class and comments on why their words are an improvement over the original words.

5. I display the posters in the classroom as references.

Write What You Mean

This exercise encourages the use of detail.

1. I prepare two short paragraphs: one in which several activities are described, but no descriptive adjectives or adverbs are used, and another version of the same paragraph in which descriptive words and phrases are included to paint a more vivid picture. For the first example, I use something like this:

   Yesterday I went to the park. I had fun. I stayed all day and then I went home and ate dinner.

2. I read the paragraph aloud and then ask the students to think about what is in their minds as I read. What pictures are they seeing? When students share ideas, the class discovers that some students had one idea of what was happening, some had another idea, and some usually say that they didn’t have any visual image in their minds at all.

3. Next I read aloud the second version of the paragraph, which includes vivid descriptive adjectives and adverbs. For example:

   Yesterday I went to the city park that has the huge circular pond. I had fun splashing water all over my friends with an empty Coke can. I stayed all day until the sun went down and I got chilly. Then I went home and ate a big bowl of steaming soup to warm up.

4. Then I ask students what happens as they hear this version of the paragraph. Are the pictures in their minds more vivid? Which words and phrases help create a picture? How do the sensory details affect them as they listen? After comparing the two versions,
students readily understand that a writer who wants to convey a clear, vivid picture needs to use descriptive language and that sensory details are an important way to add interest to a piece of writing.

5. As a variation on this activity, I sometimes read the first paragraph and ask students to draw what they see. Then I do the same with the second, more descriptive version. This also can be an effective way to show students that descriptive language forms more detailed and vivid pictures in the mind.

As What as a What?

The purpose of this exercise is to focus student attention on one useful type of figurative language, the simile.

1. Students sit in one large circle.
2. I state, “I have a dog as long as a limo.”
3. Students reply, “As what as a what?”
4. I repeat my sentence.
5. Each student then takes a turn sharing a simile on any topic, and each time the rest of the circle responds, “As what as a what?”

The creation and repetition of the many different similes help students feel comfortable creating and using their own similes in writing.

These simple exercises can help make your students ready, willing, and able to participate in the writing process throughout the school year.

*Judy E. Neal, Porter, Texas*

“*And Now for the Rest of the Story . . .”*

I use the story of Goldilocks and the three bears to involve students in a mock-trial project that involves writing, speaking, role-playing, and using persuasive language. I originally got the idea for this assignment from a passage in the short story “Blues Ain’t No Mockin’ Bird” by Toni Cade Bambara, which presents a different perspective on the traditional story:
“I read a story once,” said Cathy soundin like Granny teacher. “About this lady Goldilocks who barged into a house that wasn’t even hers. And not invited, you understand. Messed over the people’s groceries and broke up the people’s furniture. Had the nerve to sleep in folks’ bed.”

First, I present students with an unbiased oral summary of the Goldilocks story, which simply describes the events up to the point where the bears return home. At this point, I stop and insert radio commentator Paul Harvey’s famous phrase, “And now for the rest of the story...” I continue: “As soon as Momma Bear noticed someone had eaten the porridge, she dialed 911. The police arrived just as Goldilocks ran out of the house. After a brief chase, the officers caught Goldilocks.”

At this point, I start a discussion about the “evidence” against Goldilocks, and students help me compile information that can be used against her: the empty porridge bowl, the broken chair, Baby Bear’s statement, and the statements of police officers who witnessed Goldilocks leaving the house.

I explain to students that we are going to hold a short trial for Goldilocks, and that they will need to take the part of key participants and write depositions for the court. I explain that a deposition is defined as either spoken or written testimony given under oath. Students or pairs of students volunteer to write depositions for Goldilocks, Momma Bear, Papa Bear, Baby Bear, the police officers, and Goldilocks’s family.

Students have one class period to write their depositions and one class period to edit and polish them. During the next class period, students will be reading their statements to the judge (me), so I begin by giving them some tips on presentation techniques, such as the importance of speaking slowly and clearly, making occasional eye contact, and avoiding nervous gestures. While each student reads aloud his or her deposition, the other students take notes. I give a few tips on note-taking, too: listen for important points, don’t try to write down every word, jot down key words and phrases, and use simple abbreviations for common words.

Then it’s time for “closing arguments.” Each student decides to be either a defense attorney or a prosecuting attorney, and as homework for the next class period they write short persuasive essays from the point of view of their chosen attorney. They are to rely on previous
class discussions, the depositions they heard, persuasive language, and their own imaginations to try to convince the reader that Goldilocks is innocent or guilty. During the next class period, students meet in pairs to hold writing conferences and to revise and edit their short essays.

At the beginning of the final class, students are again grouped in pairs, with each pair consisting of one defense attorney and one prosecuting attorney. Each pair of students reads their arguments to the judge (me) and jury (their classmates), who vote whether Goldilocks is innocent or guilty based on the arguments just heard. We keep a running tally on the chalkboard, and the final count of court decisions determines her fate. (If there’s a tie, the judge may determine whether to grant a reprieve or declare a mistrial.)

This project involves students in a variety of language activities, and students enjoy the twist it gives to a familiar story.

*Betty Geffers, Mount Pleasant Independent School District, Texas*

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**From Word Bubbles to Written Dialogue**

Here is an idea I have recently used to help my seventh graders develop a better understanding of how to write dialogue.

To prepare for this activity, I select, cut out, and photocopy two comic strips from the Sunday newspaper. Using white correction fluid, I cover the words in the dialogue bubbles on one copy of each cartoon. Then I make overhead transparencies of both versions of the two comics.

I also select five comic strips from the weekday edition of the newspaper, arrange them together on one 8 ½” x 11” sheet of paper, and go through the same process of photocopying, covering the dialogue bubbles on one copy, and making transparencies. I also make a photocopy of the blank version for each student.

In class I introduce my students to the concept of dialogue and how it is necessary to make a narrative really come to life. To illustrate this, I use the overhead projector to display the first blanked-out cartoon, and I call for volunteers to fill in the blanks. It is sometimes slow at first, but students usually warm up to the task quickly. I place a blank transparency over the cartoon on the overhead and write down the dialogue as students dictate it to me. (Sometimes the dialogue my students create is better than the dialogue the cartoonist came up with.)
I then put up the second blank transparency and have students write out a dialogue for it on their own. I circulate around the room to make sure everyone has the idea, and then we share our creations. Students are always interested to hear the different ways people interpret what is happening in the comic strip. For additional practice, I give each student a copy of the five blank strips to work on in class and, if necessary, to finish for homework.

The next step is to distribute guidelines for written dialogue (covering such points as using quotations marks at the beginning and end of each character’s speech; using a period, exclamation point, or question mark at the end of each speech, inside the quotes; and starting a new paragraph with each change of speaker) and to transform one of the strips into a short written scene that includes dialogue. I have found it helpful to model this for students first—placing a comic strip with text on the overhead and going through the steps of turning it into a simple narrative with dialogue. I explain that anything that would be in a “word bubble” in the comic strip should be in quotation marks, and that instead of the bubble “pointing” to the speaker to show who’s talking, we use “he said” or “she said” or similar verbs.

A recent suggestion from a colleague has provided a simple way of reminding students to start a new paragraph for each change of speaker. In my colleague’s words, “new bubble = new paragraph.”

_Art Belliveau, Russell County Middle School, Seale, Alabama_

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**Honor Thy Classmate**

How wonderful it would be if we started looking for the “good” in each person! How much better our world would be if we would focus on the positive! “Honor Thy Classmate” helps my students to do just that. I put all the names of my students in a bag. Each student selects the name of a fellow classmate and then writes a poem to honor him or her.

The form for the poem may be any that the student wishes to use. Many choose to use the bio-poem form, which is ordinarily used as a self-descriptive poem. The bio poem contains eleven lines. The first and last lines contain the person’s first name and last name. In between, the writer includes some information about the chosen person. Here’s the formula:
Line 1: First Name
Line 2: Traits (list four traits that describe this person)
Line 3: “Sibling of . . .” (description of sibling is optional)
Line 4: “Lover of . . .” (list four items)
Line 5: “Who needs . . .” (list three items)
Line 6: “Who gives . . .” (list three items)
Line 7: “Who feels . . .” (list three items)
Line 8: “Who fears . . .” (list three items)
Line 9: “Who would like to see . . .” (list three items)
Line 10: “Resident of . . .” (name of a place)
Line 11: Last Name

Students are to give me their framed poems two days before the “reading” and must not reveal the identity of their subjects. Excitement fills the room when the day comes for my students to read their poems. Students have heard from previous classes what a special assignment this is, and they are eager to hear the descriptions of their classmates. Some of the best poems have been written by students who selected names of classmates that they did not know well. They had to become detectives and search for information to use for their poems and many times have discovered how special their subjects really were.

Here is an excerpt from one student’s finished poem:

To Rachel
Your friends are lucky to have someone like you.
Someone who is always honest and true.
When people are lost you show them the way.
You always seem to have the right words to say.
Never change because your life has just begun to start.
Keep living your life to its fullest,
and always follow your heart.
—from Michael

*Susan Smith Akin, Pinson Valley High School, Pinson, Alabama*

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**A Medley of Writing Starts**

I have pulled together these teaching methods by combining the suggestions and strategies of many different teachers. The idea for the “writing start” came from Dr. Marie Nelson at the University of
Florida. The specific plan for “read-around-groups” mentioned here came from Beverly Jones at Fort Clarke Middle School in Gainesville, Florida. All other ideas are original.

Helping students become better communicators is the main goal of my language arts class. Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing are the ways that we communicate in society, and language arts classes tackle all five areas.

Although I teach all these aspects of communication throughout the year in many different ways, I have developed a weekly staple for my class that combines all five and brings students in touch with a variety of stimuli from the “real” world outside of school. My students know it as the “writing start.”

Most language arts classes have a day for writing in journals or responding in writing to prompts or stimuli. The writing start is similar; students must write at least half of a page each Thursday in response to the prompt that I give them, and they receive a grade for the assignment each week. It is called a “writing start” because students may use the writing as a first draft or prewrite for our longer writing assignments. The types of prompts that I give and what we do with the writing when it is completed are the unique aspects of this teaching strategy. I try to present students with many different types of stimuli, and I give them options for how they may respond.

One time we discussed how wonderful writing can inspire works of art, and how beautiful art can inspire people to write. I read aloud a passage by J. R. R. Tolkien that had inspired a painting as I projected a copy of the painting on the wall. I then projected another painting and asked the students to let it inspire them as they wrote.

In another response to art, I projected a painting by an African American artist who lives in Atlanta and asked students either to imagine what had inspired him or to write about what they saw in the painting.

Before Halloween, I brought in The Pop-Up Book of Phobias by Gary Greenberg (Rob Weisbach Books, 1999), a book with pop-up pictures of the most common phobias and explanations for each picture. They included arachnophobia, with a large, realistic-looking spider popping up out of the book. After students heard and viewed this book, their assignment was to write about what they fear.

Before Thanksgiving, I read excerpts from a cookbook with mouth-watering pictures of food. For this assignment, the students either wrote recipes or described their holiday traditions.
In January, I read them the true story of a man who had written down over one hundred goals for his life when he was a teenager and was close to meeting them by the time he was forty-seven. Their assignment was to try writing fifteen goals for their own life, steering away from material possessions.

Most recently, as part of our poetry unit, we discussed the difference between reading the lyrics to a song and listening to the song being sung. I first read aloud the lyrics to a favorite song of mine, and then we listened to the song several times as they wrote either about how the two experiences were different, or about whether it is the lyrics or the sound of the music that determines why they like music on the radio.

The different stimuli I use result in a wide variety of responses. What do I do with these wonderful responses?

Each Friday following the prompt, we do one of three activities. Some days we have read-around-groups. On these days, students get into groups of three or four. Each group has a letter, and each student has a number. Students write their group letter and their number on their papers rather than their names. Each group exchanges its papers with the students in another group and spends two to four minutes silently reading the papers it receives.

When time is up, the group members must discuss and agree on which paper is the best in the batch; they write down the number and letter of that paper. The process continues until every student has read every paper.

When students have their own papers back, I tally the votes, and the “winners” from each group are revealed. In order to earn the extra points that this honor conveys, the winners must read their writing starts aloud to the class.

The listening classmates must follow presentation etiquette, meaning that they must listen attentively and quietly, and they clap when the presentation is finished. They are allowed to ask any reasonable questions of the speaker, and the speaker answers.

Although I did not develop the idea of read-around-groups, I have made some changes so that the groups fit perfectly with what the writing starts are meant to accomplish. Unfortunately, the read-around-groups do not allow every student to speak in front of the class. This problem led to our other two Friday activities.
Some days, we play the game “spin-the-pen.” We get into one big circle with writing starts in hand. I place a pen in the middle of the circle, spin it, and if the designated end lands pointing to a student, that student has to stand up and read. The good news for these students is that this will earn them bonus points. The game usually continues until everyone has read, or until class ends.

On our busier Fridays, students have the opportunity to stand up and share by volunteering. On these days, anyone who volunteers gets the bonus points. The methods of sharing that I use with writing starts are effective on all fronts of the language arts spectrum.

I give students a way to respond to what they view and hear, and they form a much more positive attitude toward writing when they are interested in the topic. They also write knowing that their papers may be read and heard by peers, and they adjust their writing accordingly.

When they do read one another’s papers, they improve their judgment skills and their own ways of writing, and during the times when we share writings, they are practicing both their public-speaking skills and their skills as audience members. I would certainly recommend this approach to any middle school language arts teacher.

*Laurie A. Dennison, South Paulding Middle School, Dallas, Georgia*

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**My Book of Others**

Imagine your eighth graders crowded around your desk one morning, excited about a project they were turning in and eager to see what others had created. This teacher’s fantasy became a reality through the project I call “My Book of Others.”

As Lois Lowry, author of *The Giver*, wrote, “And if I’ve learned anything, it is that we can’t live in a walled world, in an ‘only us, only now’ world.” None of us is an island—instead, we all live in a social world where others impact our lives, contributing to who we are and who we will become.

“My Book of Others” encourages students to honor those with whom they are journeying through life. The total booklet consists of 10 separate pages, each with its own creative focus and writing challenge.
Page One

Page one stresses “Honoring Others.” Students are to imagine that they have just written their first novel. They then write a brief dedication to a special person. To better understand the format, we read some dedications by published authors before students start writing.

Page Two

Page two, “Learning from Others,” focuses on early mentors (day-care personnel, preschool or kindergarten teachers). I first share with the students some basic lessons from Robert Fulghum’s All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten (Fawcett, 1993). Then they write about five early lessons they learned and how these lessons still impact their lives today.

Lessons learned range from recognizing that crayons are for drawing, not eating, to realizing that “LMNOP” is not one single letter in the alphabet, and to understanding the value of the “friendship circle.” The accounts are both humorous and touching.

Page Three

On page three, “Reaching Out to Others,” students pretend they have just won a million dollars on “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” There’s a catch, however: they have to become philanthropists and give away all of their money. Students’ choice of recipients and their explanations reveal much about the students and their hearts of gold.

Page Four

The fourth page emphasizes “Thanking a Special Other.” Using the correct form for a friendly letter, they write to a middle school teacher who most positively affected them, both academically and personally. (I encourage them to select someone other than me, though I don’t actually restrict their choice.) Several colleagues told me they had tears in their eyes as they read letters by former and current students.

Page Five

“Getting to Know a Special Other” results in a fascinating page five. Students interview an adult who plays a role in their world but about
whom they know very little: a neighbor, a bus driver, a salesperson at their favorite store, a coach or dance teacher, a librarian, a waitress at their favorite restaurant, a nurse or receptionist, etc. This helps students develop respect for others and a better understanding of the many jobs involved in helping our communities run smoothly. Students write up their interviews in dialogue format.

Page Six

Page six combines U.S. history with language arts. In “Electing a Presidential Other,” students write a campaign speech for a friend or relative who they believe would make the ideal U.S. president. They are asked to think about qualities they think are necessary to be a good president and to make their choice accordingly. They must also mention in their speeches the issues they believe are important for a president to address.

Page Seven

My students’ favorite was page seven: “An Ideal Microcosm of Others.” I ask students to think about their friends (who may or may not be students at our school) and the strongest characteristics and qualities of these friends. Then students are to think about the classes they are currently taking, both core classes and electives. Their assignment is to create the ideal staff of teachers for these classes by assigning a friend to teach each class. Students must explain why the characteristics and qualities of each person make him or her a good fit for the job. Students’ writings for this page can be very imaginative, and sometimes quite humorous.

Page Eight

For page eight, “Painting a Picture of an Important Other,” students write a creative poem about a special person in their lives. We use an 11-line format for our poems, but other forms of poetry could be used as well.

Page Nine

The eighth-grade core novel for our school is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. For page nine, “In the Eyes of Others,” I make reference to Atticus
Finch’s advice and ask students to step into another’s shoes to better understand themselves. Students are asked to choose three adjectives they feel others would use to describe them. They also need to include a specific example from their lives to support each adjective. This step has produced some delightful writings.

Page Ten

The “Book of Others” ends with the tenth page, “A Recipe from Others.” Using cooking terms, the students write a recipe that creatively shows the ingredients others in their lives have given to them.

The final product, including a cover collage of pictures of others, a title page, and the 10 polished pages, is a masterpiece of creativity and caring. Many students laminated each page, used computer paper that captured the theme of each focus, and added graphics, pictures, or their own illustrations. All booklets were beautifully bound. I set up this assignment so that each written page was worth nine points, with the cover and title page worth five points each. Many students received extra credit for their extraordinary efforts.

As my eighth graders prepare to enter the larger world of high school, “My Book of Others” reminds them that they are not alone. No matter what challenges await them, they will always have other people supporting them and applauding them.

Ronna L. Edelstein, Abbott Middle School, West Bloomfield, Michigan