



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2019 Volume I: Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay

Personal Essays and Storytelling: Trevor Noah, Nelson Mandela, and Nadine Gordimer

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Introduction

In this unit we will use the memoir *“It’s Trevor Noah: Born a Crime”* by Trevor Noah as a mentor text to teach personal essay writing. Memoirs and personal essays are closely related genres of writing. Memoirs are collections of personal essays written by an author, interwoven together through specific themes. Noah’s memoir uses dynamic storytelling to share stories of his childhood in South Africa. Noah was a mixed raced child who grew up with his mother. Because interracial couples were not allowed, his mere existence was illegal during apartheid. Weaving through a collection of comedic and sometimes traumatic childhood memories, Noah takes readers through the perils of living in South Africa during apartheid.

While Noah’s memoir will be the main text in this unit, other notable South African writings are featured. Students will read and study excerpts of Nelson Mandela’s memoir *“Long Walk to Freedom”* and essays written by Nadine Gordimer. By studying writings by Mandela and Gordimer, students will learn other styles of writing as well as gain deeper knowledge in the recent history of South Africa. Nelson Mandela was one of the world’s greatest leaders and most prolific writers as the first black president of South Africa. Nadine Gordimer was a South African author and anti-apartheid political activist. Gordimer was a recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature. Students will read *“Mandela, My Countryman”* an essay by Gordimer that was published in *The New Yorker* in 2013. Also, students will read *“A South African Childhood: Allusions in a Landscape”*, another essay written by Gordimer published in *The New Yorker* in 1954.

Noah, Mandela, and Gordimer each have vastly different writing styles and perspectives, but their writings are interconnected in this unit. Noah was born in the early 1980s and currently hosts the American political satire show, *The Daily Show*. He was a child when apartheid was dismantled. Nelson Mandela, born in 1918 served 27 years in prison for fighting against apartheid before becoming president. And Nadine Gordimer was a white, middle class South African whose parents who were immigrants. She was an anti-apartheid political activist. The atrocities and disparities caused by apartheid as well as the spirit of the South African people are evident in all pieces of writings studied in this unit. The power of the written word to reach and connect people is an inspiration gained from reading and analyzing these works together.

The unit will highlight the style of storytelling Noah uses in his memoir. Students will analyze the stages of his stories and use this as a model to structure their own essays. After reading essays and excerpts from Mandela

and Gordimer, students will focus on specific sentences from their works. The sentences will exemplify various uses of metaphors, style, and sentence structure. By the culmination of the unit students will complete their own personal essays.

Background Environment

A common thread between the writings in this unit will be the authors' childhood memories. In my own childhood memories, I remember loving to read and write. I grew up in the same school district in which I teach, Tulsa Public Schools. Needless to say our district and community have changed tremendously since I was in elementary school over twenty years ago. I vividly remember writing all the time. We had a substantial amount of time to write freely in our journals without fear. I also remember the "hamburger paragraph" which was a strategy that was taught to us to organize a paragraph. The two buns were our topic and closing sentences. The lettuce, tomato, and meat represented our details.

This image of organization stuck with me. While I don't need a picture of a clip art hamburger to brainstorm writing anymore, the ability to structure and organize my thoughts on paper was instilled in me at a young age. As an adult I recognize how those two strategies were integral into developing me as a writer. Journaling built stamina and confidence in us. The hamburger template gave us structure and organization. I aim to give my students the same opportunity to write extensively and learn how to structure their thoughts on paper.

Because of the pressure on public schools to perform well on standardized tests, many US school districts prioritize reading comprehension at the expense of writing. Consequently, writing is taught separately from reading in many classrooms.¹ In other words, it is not taught at all. Our district is not immune to these gaps in writing instruction. About four years ago our district implemented a curriculum that contains rich content and complex texts. Although writing is embedded into the program, most of the writing focuses on answering comprehension questions and providing evidence from the text. While this is an important skill, teachers still need to broaden writing instruction to teach students to write creatively. This unit aims to provide students with rich content as well as writing instruction that fill gaps missing in US writing curriculums.

Who the Unit Serves

The fifth grade students in my classes have a wide range of reading ability. Typically, more than half of my students are proficient in reading. While some score in the top 20th percentile nationally, others score in the bottom 20th percentile. Generally, students score pretty well on assessments comparatively to other students in our district. My concern as the 5th grade reading teacher is that regardless of reading ability, the vast majority of students begin the school year lacking basic organizational and foundational skills in writing. Some students who are highly proficient in answering multiple choice questions overwhelmingly struggle to write coherent sentences, paragraphs, and essays. Our school reflects the national trends of teaching writing. Teachers struggle to give ample time and attention to effective writing instruction.² Reading and writing should be intrinsically linked together. This unit will be an opportunity to shrink the gap between the two subjects for our students and strengthen their writing skills.

Content Objectives

Great writing is like a performance written on paper. Before the written word existed, stories were passed down from generation to generation orally. Orators performed the stories they told using inflections and gestures to make them come to life. Writing is similar to performing because authors use literary tools to bring stories to life. Unconfident writers have stage fright and find it hard to fully express themselves. Great performers practice extensively before mastering their craft. Like other expressive forms of art, writing personal essays takes practice to develop. Students need to learn various styles and tools in order to grow into confident writers, unafraid to take the stage.

Background on Information on “It’s Trevor Noah: Born a Crime”

Trevor Noah is no stranger to the stage and his performance style is reflected in his writing. Noah is a standup comedian and hosts the Emmy Award winning show *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central. The writing in his memoir expresses his style of storytelling and personality. On stage, he has a special talent for impersonating characters of various backgrounds and languages in his stories. He speaks multiple languages. He often tells a story within a story that helps to build up to the punchline of his jokes. This style is reflected in his memoir. Throughout the memoir, he often writes vignettes in the middle of the story that later make the climax of the story more poignant for the reader.

Structurally this book is a good mentor text to demonstrate personal essays. Each chapter reads as a separate personal essay. Chapters begin with captivating introductions, explain a turning point or surprise, and possess a clear conclusion. The memoir as a whole is not completely chronological because the chapters have their own beginnings, middles, and ends. His introductions use strategies such as vividly describing a person or beginning with a captivating sentence. Students can imitate these techniques in their own writings. Students will also utilize the narrative element of theme throughout their personal essay, which Noah models well. Challenging students to identify themes in their own writing pushes them to use more complex and mature writing strategies.

It’s Trevor Noah: Born a Crime is a young readers’ adapted version of *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*. Parents wanted a version of the book that their kids could read on their own. The stories are virtually the same in both books; however, the young readers’ edition excludes adult language. Noah does not hold back complex subject matters in his young readers’ book. Readers will experience the same stories; however, the young reader’s edition is more appropriate in an upper elementary to middle school classroom setting.

Background Information on Noah, Mandela, and Gordimer

Each of the author’s life stories are unique and shape their writing. While all of them were South Africans who lived during apartheid, each of them has a distinct path. Apartheid was an advanced system of institutionalized racial segregation of South African people which lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1990s. Apartheid resembles other terrible atrocities like the Jim Crow Laws and forcible removal of Natives in the United States. South African tribes were forcibly removed from their homes and isolated. Systematically, black South Africans were regulated to restrict laws prohibiting from access to jobs and education. Naturally, apartheid profoundly impacted the paths of each of the author’s lives.

Nelson Mandela was born in Mvezo, South Africa. He was a leader of the African National Congress (ANC) which fought against apartheid. His writings and speeches were banned. He was arrested more than once. He was put on trial for acts against the government and sentenced to life in prison. During his time in prison Mandela wrote extensively. He wrote letters to his family and continued to denounce apartheid. Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years before being released in 1990.

While he was in prison at Robben Island, a book entitled *Burger's Daughter* was smuggled into his prison, which was about revolutionaries' and their children.³ The book was written by Nadine Gordimer. She was a white South African whose parents were immigrants. Her mother was from London and her father was from Russia. Gordimer grew up in the miner's town, Transvaal in South Africa. She became an anti-apartheid activist and writer. Her writings documented the lives of Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu as well as the political activism and history of South Africa. She also wrote fictional novels which centered on the lives of black South Africans.

Trevor Noah's mother was a black South African and his father was Swiss-German. During apartheid romantic relationships were prohibited between whites and nonwhites. His existence was proof of his parents' crime. Growing up he was not allowed to play outside with other kids in fear that he would be taken away. He could have been taken from his parents and given to another family. His parents could have been imprisoned.

Nelson Mandela being a black South African who grew up in a village has a different view point than Nadine Gordimer who grew up in a coal mining town. Unlike Gordimer and Mandela, Trevor Noah was too young to completely understand the intricacies of apartheid. He lived during the era of apartheid, but naturally has a different viewpoint than Gordimer and Mandela who experienced apartheid as adults. Similarly, Gordimer recognized the separateness of different groups but didn't internalize or interpret the impact of this until she became older.

In this unit we will study eight writings by Noah, Nelson, and Gordimer that complement each other in content. Reading multiple writings on the same topic deepens students' comprehension of the material. Consequently, students will have a better understanding of the literary devices and writing techniques throughout the pieces of writing.

Selected Readings

First, I recommend reading aloud the entire book, "It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime." The book anchors the content of Nelson Mandela's and Nadine Gordimer's writings. Reading the book in its entirety will reinforce the overall themes of the memoir and the other selected readings. However, if time does not permit, reading the selected chapters aloud will be sufficient for students. The book is written for upper elementary to middle school students and tells stories in ways that students can easily relate. If a teacher decides to read the entire novel, the pieces of writings will be taught in the order of the book and each lesson should be a pausing point.

The first reading will be Chapter 1 "Run" from Noah's memoir. The chapter begins with a captivating opening line, "I was nine years old when my mother threw me out of a moving car." He writes a series of vignettes that build up to the main story. The first vignette details the great lengths he and his mother go through to attend multiple church services each Sunday. His mother, a devout Christian went to each service because "each church gave her something different." He ends the vignette and ties back into the story by saying, "This particular Sunday, the Sunday I was hurled from a moving car, started out like any other Sunday." He then explains that while getting ready to go to church that Sunday, their car broke down. Because of the previous vignette about going to church, the reader understands that Trevor's mom will be determined to still go to

church, even if it means taking longer trips by riding the minibuses. Trevor tries to convince his mother to stay home but she responds saying, “Sunquela” which means in Xhosa, “don’t underestimate me.”

This segues into another vignette about how growing up, he heard that word often because he was mischievous as a child. “We had a very Tom-and-Jerry relationship.” He explains how his mom would chase him to give him a hiding (spanking) when he got in trouble. All of the chasing made him and his mom excellent runners. He ends the vignette by saying, “The last thing I wanted to do that Sunday morning was climb into some minibus, but the second I heard my mom say, ‘sun’quela’ I knew my fate was sealed.”

Next, Noah writes about the violence that ensued during the fall of apartheid. During that period, political groups and tribes fought for power. He explains the war between Zulu and Xhosa tribes. This explanation makes his eventual telling of the main story more suspenseful. Trevor, his mom, and his little brother were on a minibus alone with a Zulu driver. His mom is Xhosa. The bus driver began making threats towards Trevor’s mom. In an effort to save their lives his mom pushes Trevor out of the car and jumps out behind him, then yells “run!” Trevor and his mom begin running and outrun the men chasing them. Again, the previous vignette of being chased by his mom down the streets helps the reader picture them outrunning the dangerous bus driver.

All of the vignettes lead up to that moment. The vignettes serve as momentum that causes more suspense for the actual story. Each vignette was tied together by a phrase like “On that Sunday...” It reminds the reader that there is a bigger story coming. The phrases keep the story on track and keep the reader from losing interest in between all of the vignettes.

Next, students will read three passages juxtaposing childhoods in South Africa. The first passage is *Chapter 5 “The Second Girl”* of Noah’s memoir. The beginning of the chapter explains Noah’s mother, Patricia who grew up feeling out of place in her family. She was the second girl in her family and was of little value in her family. As a child she was sent to live with her aunt in Transkei. She lived with other cousins who were unwanted. Very early in life she learned to fend for herself and make her own way in life. She went to school and learned English. When she got older, she enrolled in a secretarial course and became a secretary.

He later goes on to explain how his mother’s upbringing influenced how she brought him up. She gave him a name that does not have any meaning in Xhosa or South Africa. She taught him English and gave him access to books. She wanted him to have the freedom to be whoever he wanted to be. As apartheid crumbled, Patricia decided to move out of Soweto and to a mixed neighborhood Eden Park. He states, “The end of apartheid was a gradual thing. It wasn’t like the Berlin Wall where one day it just came down. Apartheid’s walls cracked and crumbled over many years.” Trevor’s mom felt it was a good time to move. She continued to take him on adventures to the park, the ice rink, or the movies. “My mom raised me like a white kid – not culturally but in the sense that the world was my oyster.” People criticized his mother for raising him this way but she wanted him to have an imagination.

Next, students will read a portion of “*A Country Childhood*” a chapter from Nelson Mandela’s “*A Long Walk to Freedom*.” He grew up in Qunu, a village of about a couple hundred people. Mandela describes growing up as a Xhosa child and the games they played. Unlike Noah, Mandela’s parents raised him more traditionally. “Like all Xhosa children, I acquired knowledge mainly through observation. We were meant to learn through imitation and emulation, not through questions.” He grew up following the traditional customs of his people. Some members of his community were westernized and convinced Mandela’s family to send Mandela to school. At school he was given the name “Nelson” by his teacher. A scene in this chapter describes Mandela’s father making him pants but cutting off his own and tying a string around the waist. As a boy, up until then he

had only worn a blanket wrapped around him. He states, "I must have been a comical sight, but I have never owned a suit I was prouder to wear than my father's cut-off pants." ⁴

Both Noah and Nelson's parents recognized the potential of their children and aimed to give them opportunities to education the best way possible. Students can recognize that although both authors grew up in different decades and under different circumstances there is a common theme of parenthood, family, and upbringing. Another theme is the power and influence of names in South African cultural. Mandela writes, "Africans of my generation-and even today-generally have both English and an African name." Nelson's birth name is Rolihlahla Mandela, yet he was given the name "Nelson" due to the British education he received. He writes, "There was no such thing as African culture." In contrast, Noah's mother purposely gave him a name that was not South African.

In further contrast of Noah's and Mandela's upbringings, students will read, *A South African Childhood, Allusions in a Landscape*, an essay by Nadine Gordimer. The landscapes in Gordimer's essay are the various geographical areas that she travels throughout her childhood. From the gold-mining town of Transvaal she grew up in, trips to the coastal town Durbin, riding a cable car up top Table Mountain in Cape Town, to chasing elephants for a picture in Krugar National Park, Gordimer describes each of the landscapes vividly. Each setting becomes a character of its own.

She grew up in the gold-mining town, Transvaal. Describing the coal dump in Transvaal she says, "The coal dump was alive. Like a beast of prey, it woke to life in the dark." The abandoned mine workings underground caught fire at some point and began to burn nonstop. "Nobody seems to know; it shares with the idea of Hades its heat and vague eternity. But perhaps its fierce heart is being subdued gradually." While Transvaal was literally on fire, South Africa was figuratively on fire. The reader travels with Gordimer to all of her childhood adventures and she ends by explaining how she feels about her contact with other groups of people.

"For me, one of the confusing things about growing up in South Africa was the strange shift-every year or two when I was small, and then weekly, daily almost, when I was adolescent-in my consciousness of, and attitude towards, the Africans around me. I became aware of them incredibly slowly, it now seems, as with some faculty that should naturally, the way the ability to focus and to recognize voices comes to a baby in a matter of weeks after birth, have been part of my human equipment from the beginning."⁵

She begins to describe how she was taught to view native black South Africans and Indians as dirty. As a child she viewed them as she was taught. Later, when she was old enough to read and form her own beliefs she states, "the Indian became a person like ourselves."

The next reading will be *Chapter 7 "Fufi"* from Noah's memoir. Here students will study plot progression. The exposition is the setting up of characters and the setting. Trevor introduces the characters Trevor (himself), Fufi his dog, and Panther his mother's dog. He describes the two dogs, "Panther was smart. Fufi was dumb."⁶ Characterization is a narrative element that can be direct (giving explicit adjectives) or indirect (showing the emotions or reactions to reveal the character's personality.) Here Noah explains that although him and his mom believed Fufi was "dumb" in actuality, she was deaf. Next he adds more details of what it was like to spend time training and raising Fufi. "I potty trained her. She slept in my bed. A dog is a great thing for a kid to have. It's like a bicycle but with emotions."

The rising action tells the events that lead up to the climax. Trevor notices that Fufi jumps over their five foot wall every day to roam around the neighborhood. One day he decides to follow Fufi on his bicycle to see where she goes. He follows her all the way to another neighborhood. Fufi ends up at another house and jumps over the wall. She does it as if she knows exactly where she is going. Noah rings the doorbell and another kid answers the door. Here the major conflict is introduced. Noah calls for Fufi, but because she is deaf, she does not come to him. The other boy claims her as his dog, "Spotty". Noah uses dialogue build scene development. He writes, "This is our dog. Go away". I started crying, "Why are you stealing my dog?!" I turned to Fufi and begged her. "Fufi, why are you doing this to me?! Why, Fufi!?" I called to her. ⁷

The climax is the exciting part or climax of the story. Trevor goes home and tells his mother what happens. They both go back to Fufi's other home and confront Fufi and the boy's mother. Eventually, Trevor's mom offers to give the other family a hundred rand for the dog. Fufi returns home. The falling action is the events that happened after the climax and sets up the solution or resolution of the story. Walking home, Trevor and his mom were walking home and he was still upset and crying. His mom questions tells him, "It didn't cost you anything. Fufi's here. She still loves you. She's still your dog. So get over it." ⁸ The Resolution of the story is, Trevor realizes he has learned a valuable lesson, "You do not own the thing that you love."

Next students will read *Chapter 11 "Outsider"*. This chapter takes place at the beginning of high school for Trevor, shortly after apartheid ended. Noah describes the uncomfortable position of being the only mixed kid at his school. "Sandringham drew kids from all over, making it a near-perfect microcosm of postapartheid South Africa as a whole—a perfect example of what South Africa has the potential to be." The school was diverse attracting black kids who were rich, middle class, or from the township. Chinese students, Indian students, and colored students also attended the school. Students often broke into groups based on interest on the playground. During lunch, Trevor was always the first one to the Tuckshop (food truck) to get lunch every day. Because he ran quickly, other kids began to pay him to get their food. He created his own way of fitting in at school. He says, "Ever the outsider, I created my own strange little world. I did it out of necessity. I needed a way to fit in. I also needed money, a way to buy the same snacks and do the things that the other kids were doing. Which is how I became the tuckshop guy." ⁹

Next, students will read, *Chapter 100 from Freedom* in Mandela's memoir. He describes his first hours being released from prison. His first day was momentous, overwhelming, and hectic. "As so often happens in life, the momentous of an occasion is lost in the welter of a thousand details." He had people he wanted to say goodbye to, decisions about who and where he would make his first speech, coordinating filming him walking toward freedom leaving the prison gates.

Thousands of people and hundreds of photographers and television cameras and news people as well as several thousand well-wishers met him at the prison gates. "Within twenty feet or so of the gate, the cameras started clicking, a noise that sounded like some great herd of metallic beasts." Being imprisoned meant he missed out on technological advances. "When a television crew thrust a long, dark, furry object at me, I recoiled slightly, wondering if it were some newfangled weapon developed while I was in prison."

Next, students will read an essay about Gordimer meeting Mandela shortly after his release from prison. Gordimer wrote "*Mandela, My Countryman*" shortly after Mandela's death in 2013. Gordimer was one of the first people that he requested to see. Leading up to the scene of meeting Mandela, Gordimer gives a profile of him. She details how she was present during the Rivonia Trial, when he was being tried for acts against the government, and was present in court when he was sentenced to life.

In 1985, he was offered freedom if he renounced the work and resistance of the ANC. Mandela says, "Let him renounce violence. Let him say that he will dismantle apartheid. Let him urban the people's organization, the African National Congress...I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when I and you, the people, are not free." ¹⁰ He was resilient and steadfast in holding on to his ideals. In 1990, President F.W. de Klerk, lifted the ban on the ANC and its allies and affiliates, and released the remaining political prisoners. She writes, "Mandela: not a figure carved in stone but a tall man, of flesh and blood, whose suffering had made him not vengeful but still more human-even toward the people who had created the prison that was apartheid."

Gordimer and her husband traveled with Mandela to Norway when he accepted the Nobel Prize in 1993. She visited him in his last days. She paints a portrait with her words describing his strength, humility, and grace.

Upon reading these essays and excerpts students will have a deep understanding of the themes in the writings and will be prepared to analyze the literary techniques of the authors. After analyzing the literary devices, students will prepare to write their own personal essays. Each of the authors in this unit have powerful life stories that have connected people across the globe. In this unit students will find personal story in their own lives to write about and construct a personal essay.

Defining Personal Essays

Creative nonfiction has elements of fiction such as characterization, plot, and scene development, theme, symbolism, and literary devices. Noah's memoir sparks critical analysis of the world's injustices, human connections, identity, and personal growth by effectively using fictional elements. The appeal of creative nonfiction is its ability to connect universal themes to individual readers. Noah's memoir exemplifies this well.

Personal essays are nonfiction stories which are a type of creative nonfiction. Personal essays are personal because they reach the audience on a human level. The narrator of the story is not invisible.¹¹ Instead the narrator feels like a personal friend expressing an intimate story from one's life. In *Writing and Selling Short Stories and Personal Essays*, the author writes,

"Personal essays are characterized by their sense of intimacy and conversational tone. A personal essay is the author expressing his intimate thoughts and feelings...When you write from a place of vulnerability, readers see themselves in your situation and understand that their own experiences are universal."¹²

Elements of Personal Essays

Elementary writing standards require students to write narrative essays, sometimes referred as personal narratives or personal experiences. Upper elementary students focus on writing personal narrative essays and personal experience essays. Understanding the slight difference between the two forms of writing ultimately helps writers revise and improve their stories. The qualities of the two types of essays overlap. An essay can have both qualities but may lean towards one more than the other.

Personal essays use compelling story telling to convey a nonfiction event. All narratives whether fictional or nonfictional have elements such as foreshadowing, characterization, theme, plot, conflict, and setting. Authors utilize literary devices like alliteration, personification, simile, metaphor, allusion, and irony. Reading a

personal essay feels like reading a fictional story because of the usage of strong characterization and scene development, and descriptive language.¹³ Fictional stories often begin by describing the setting. Creative nonfiction writers can introduce stories similarly. For example, in the beginning paragraphs of Gordimer's essay she writes, "After miles and miles of sienna-red ploughed earth, after miles and miles of silk-fringed mealies standing as high as your eyes on either side of the road and ugly farmhouses where women in bunchy cotton dresses and sun-bonnets started after the car as we passed..."¹⁴

Personal essays also possess a strong narrative arc. The narrative arc is the progression of the plot in a story. The beginning of the arc explains the characters and setting of the narrative. The conflict is the main problem in the story. Plot development includes exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Exposition is the introduction of characters and settings. The rising action are the events that build up the tension and introduces the conflict or problem of the story. The climax is the major event that changes the character. The falling action are the events that wrap up the story. The resolution explains a lesson or how the story ends. Fictional stories typically follow this arc in this form. Creative nonfiction, especially personal narratives have great plot development.

Personal essays sometimes express how an event changed the author's life or teaches a lesson. In Noah's "Fufi" he explains losing his dog to another owner as a child. He hilariously retells the story of how he and his mom return Fufi home. When Fufi showed love toward the other owner, Trevor felt betrayed. In the end he writes, "I believed that Fufi was *my* dog, but of course that wasn't true. Fufi was a dog. I was a boy. We got along well. She happened to live in my house. That experience shaped what I've felt about relationships ever since: you do not own the thing that you love."¹⁵ The essay reveals a lesson learned that has shaped Noah throughout life. The story can effectively reach a wide range of readers because the lesson is universal. Everyone has experienced heartbreak in some form or other.

Defining Memoirs

Memoirs are typically longer piece and are usually books. They are collections of personal essays and stories centered on major themes. Memoirs are easily confused with autobiographies. Memoirs are biographical in nature because they tell the accounts of one's life.¹⁶ Whereas an autobiography tells the chronological account of a person's lifetime, a memoir narrows on fewer events that center on specific themes.¹⁷ The credibility of the author is key to the success of a memoir. Readers must believe the characters and events in the story are real. The author's ability to use literary tools to connect readers to the story is the heart of memoir writing.

Autobiographies sometimes read like encyclopedia entries. Memoirs read like novels. In his essay, *The Shower and the Fish*, Peter Gibbs says, "Memoir is about the luscious weave of the outer and inner life. Creative? You bet." He describes the revelation he has that inspires him to write a memoir after recognizing that he confused the genre with autobiographies. Before he was uninterested in writing memoirs because he thought they lacked creativity. He later says, "...the deepest memories are stored in the heart, not the brain" in describing the experience of beginning to write his memoir. Continuing to explain he says, "Living life is one thing; turning it into a story is another. Shaping a story from life is high, creative adventure."¹⁸

Using Subgenres to Narrow Focus and Public Point

Subgenres are useful but are not the most important during the beginning stages of writing. The two subgenres often overlap. Personal experience essays can have strong narrative arcs. Personal narratives can

express a lesson. Personal essays typically lean more towards one subgenre than another. Understanding the distinction between the genres simply helps authors focus on a clear direction to drive a story. The direction may not become clear until after the first or second draft. Students should learn that revising essays requires improving the overall structure of the piece. Understanding genres and subgenres helps writers develop their essays into more cohesive writings.

If student writers are leaning more towards writing a personal narrative, they may ask themselves what are the clear problem and solutions in their stories. If they are writing personal experience essays, they may want to ask themselves what lessons they learned and how the experience changed them. Great personal essays have a public point that anchors their stories. In other words, students must learn to write for specific audiences. If not, their essays risk sounding like diary entries instead of well-developed stories to be shared.

Teaching Strategies

Mentor Texts

Mentor texts are examples of great writing that teachers use to model for student writing. Magazine articles, poems, novels, essays, and various other forms of writing can be used as mentor texts. When using reading passages or traditional reading textbooks, teachers focus on what is happening. They ask questions to reveal what an author is saying. The great writing in mentor texts shift the conversation to focus on how the author is saying something. After reviewing and analyzing examples of writing strategies through mentor texts, students model the same strategies in their own writing.

Mentor Sentences

Mentor sentences are sentences that students study for a few days to a week. Students will do activities like identifying the figurative language and parts of speech, revising the sentences, and imitating their own sentences.

Journaling

Students will free write in their journals consistently. For students who need extra support, prompts will be provided to get them started. The purpose of beginning the unit with journaling is to build stamina, confidence, and voice. The best way to become a better writer is to write consistently. Writing freely without being concerned about mechanics will reveal students' personality, wit, and humor. Students will transition from free write journaling to developing one of their journal entries into a complete narrative essay. Students will complete activities to help them structure and organize their thoughts into a complete work.

Plot Mountain Diagrams or Freytag's Pyramid

Plot mountain diagrams, also known as Freytag's Pyramid, are visual models of a plot development. These diagrams come in a variety of different graphic organizers. First, students will diagram the plot progression of chapters in the memoir. Next, students will take one of their journal entries and fill in the plot on their own plot mountains.

Activities

What's Your Story?

One of the greatest challenges for student writers is determining a topic to write about extensively. Some students commonly stare into space and struggle to begin writing during a writer's workshop or journaling time. Sometimes they choose topics that are difficult to give descriptive details because they have little background knowledge on what they are writing about. At the beginning of this unit, we will complete activities that will help students determine a personal story to write. First students will make lists to help them brainstorm a story in their lives to write about. Next, students will discuss with buddy something from the list. Then, they will write journal entries to help them brainstorm ideas. The activities below are flexible and can be used more than once as needed. For instance, teachers can have students complete different list on different days or complete all them at once.

List ideas

1. Make a list of five or more of your favorite things to do.
2. Make a list of times you tried something new.
3. List situations when you accomplished something that made yourself proud.

Turn and Talk/Journaling

Here students can pick a topic on their lists and share about it with a partner.

What's the Problem?

Narrative stories have a conflict or problem. After analyzing the problem in Chapter 7 "Fufi", students will identify their own conflict in their stories.

Guiding Questions

What is the major problem in the story? How does Trevor feel? How do you know? What was the climax of the story? What events made the problem/conflict worse?

Mentor Sentences

A South African Childhood, Allusions in a Landscape

"In the part of South Africa where we lived, we had not only fire under our feet; we had too, a complication of tunnels as intricate as one of those delicate chunks of worm cast you find on the seashore."

"Streams oozed down from the hills and could be discovered by the ear only, since they were completely covered by low, umbrella-shaped trees..."

Long Walk to Freedom

"Within twenty feet or so of the gate, the cameras started clicking, a noise that sounded like some great head of metallic beasts."

“The driver was meant to turn right and skirt its edges, but instead, he inexplicably plunged straight into the sea of people.”

“Immediately the crowd surged forward and enveloped the car.”

“I walked out onto the balcony and saw a boundless sea of people cheering, holding flags and banners, clapping, and laughing.”

It’s Trevor Noah: Born a Crime

“Since I belonged to no group I learned to move seamlessly between groups. I floated.”

“I was everywhere with everybody, and at the same time I was all by myself.”

Resources

Key Vocabulary

ANC African National Congress, a political party in South Africa that has been in power since the election of Nelson Mandela

Apartheid a policy of segregation by the South African government

Banning a tactic used by the South African government against people and groups who were anti-apartheid; activists were prohibited from travel and speech

Johannesburg major city and largest city in South Africa

Soweto a black township in Johannesburg; its acronym means *South-Western Townships*

Township racially segregated urban areas that were reserved for non-whites in South Africa

Xhosa second largest ethnic group in South Africa; Bantu language of the Xhosa people; one of the country’s official languages

Zulu a Bantu ethnic group that is the largest in South Africa

Helpful Picture Books for Students

Nelson Mandela Long Walk to Freedom by Chris VanWyk

Nelson Mandela by Kadir Nelson

Peaceful Protest The Life of Nelson Mandela by Yona Zeldis McDonough

Nelson Mandela South African President and Civil Rights Activist by Chris Well

Grandad Mandela by Zindzi, Zazi, & Ziwelene Mandela

Books and Essays

Nelson Mandela In His Own Words by Nelson Mandela

Major Themes in It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime

Major Themes

Noah weaves complex themes throughout the memoir. Studying the examples of theme in a nonfiction piece of writing will demonstrate to students how to use theme in their own writing. The major themes are interwoven through different chapters. Although the memoir is not written in a linear timeline of his life, the themes connect his writings into a cohesive body of work.

Language

In South Africa there are eleven official languages. Several other languages are spoken by different tribes. Apartheid systematically separated and isolated tribes from one another. The purpose was to exasperate tension and strife among the groups. Growing up Trevor often felt like an outsider. His mother and family were Xhosa, but he did not look like the rest of his family. Trevor is a polyglot, a person who commands many languages. Maneuvering through the world with the ability to exchange conversations easily giving him a sense of belonging. He refers to himself as a “chameleon” being able to blend in with different groups through language. ¹⁹

In Chapter 7 “Chameleon”, Noah says, “I soon learned that the quickest way to bridge the race gap was through language.” He describes a scene where he and a group of Zulu guys were walking behind him down the street. Trevor overhears them planning to rob him. He quickly turns around and speaks to them in Zulu surprising them. Consequently, young men leave him alone. Next he says, “I became a chameleon. My color didn’t change, but I could change your perception of my color. I didn’t look like you, but if I spoke like you, I was you.”

In Chapter 13, “A Young Man’s Long, Awkward, Occasionally Tragic, and Frequently Humiliating Education in Affairs of the Heart, Part II: The Dance”, Trevor tells a story of taking a date to the dance. When they arrive to the dance, his date Bakiki refuses to go inside with him. Finally, with the help of a friend, Trevor realizes his date did not know how to speak English. He tries speaking his many languages realizes she speaks a language she does not know. The chapter ends with Trevor taking the girl home and her giving him a kiss goodnight. Puzzled that he “has no idea how to understand girls” Trevor realizes the language barrier does not keep him from making a connection with Bakiki.

Identity and Belonging

Trevor’s existence was illegal during Apartheid. He was the physical manifestation of his parents’ “crime”. He always feels like an outsider as he moves through different communities. His skin tone is light brown is referred to as “colored” in South Africa. However, many South Africans had never seen an actual white person in person. Because he was the lightest person in his community, some people thought of him as white, even his own family members. He mentions how his own family members gave him special treatment because he was a “white” kid. His grandparents, aunts, and uncles were afraid to discipline him.

In Chapter 11 “Outsider”, Noah navigates fitting in at school. After finding his niche as the “tuckshop” guy, he writes, “Since I belonged to no group I learned to move seamlessly between groups. I floated. I was a

chameleon, still, a cultural chameleon.”²⁰

Racism and Apartheid

Apartheid hangs over South Africa like a shadow. The reason Trevor feels like an outsider is because of his lack of ability to live as a normal kid being mixed raced under Apartheid. In the introduction to Chapter 2 *Born a Crime*, Noah says, “Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under control...In America you had the forced removal of the native peoples onto reservations coupled with slavery followed by segregation. Imagine all three of those things happening to the same group of people at the same time. That was apartheid.”²¹

In Chapter he describes how he was unable to be seen in public with his parents. He says,

“Where most children are proof of their parents’ love, I was proof of their criminality. The only time I could be seen with my father was indoors...I couldn’t walk with my mother either; a light skinned child with a black woman would raise too many questions.”²²

Later, he describes the end of Apartheid,

“The end of apartheid was a gradual thing. It wasn’t like the Berlin Wall where one day it just came down. Apartheid’s walls cracked and crumbled over many years. Concessions were made here and there, some laws were repealed, others simply weren’t enforced. There came a point, in the months before Mandela’s release, when we could live less furtively.”²³

Notes

1. Natalie Wexler, “Elementary Education Has Gone Terribly Wrong,” *The Atlantic* August 2019.
2. Natalie Wexler, “Elementary Education Has Gone Terribly Wrong,” *The Atlantic* August 2019.
3. Nadine Gordimer, “Mandela, My Countryman,” *The New Yorker* June 28, 2013.
4. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1994)
5. Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times Writing and Living, 1954 - 2008* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010)
6. Trevor Noah, *It’s Trevor Noah:Born a Crime* (New York: Random House Children’s Books, 2019)
7. Trevor Noah, *It’s Trevor Noah:Born a Crime* (New York: Random House Children’s Books, 2019)
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9. Trevor Noah, *It’s Trevor Noah:Born a Crime* (New York: Random House Children’s Books, 2019)
10. Nadine Gordimer, “Mandela, My Countryman,” *The New Yorker* June 28, 2013.
11. Windy Harris, *Writing and Selling Short Stories and Personal Essays* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 2017).
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13. Windy Harris, *Writing and Selling Short Stories and Personal Essays* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 2017).
14. Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times Writing and Living, 1954 - 2008* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010)
15. Trevor Noah, *It’s Trevor Noah:Born a Crime* (New York: Random House Children’s Books, 2019)

16. Patricia Thang, "What is a Memoir" Book Riot February 16 2018 Brian Kelms, "Memoir vs Autobiography" Writer's Digest 2013
17. Peter Gibb, "The Shower and the Fish," *The Magic Memoir*, ed. Linda Joy Meyers; Brooke Warner (Berkeley: She Writes Press, 2016)
18. Trevor Noah, *It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime* (New York: Random House Children's Books, 2019)
19. Trevor Noah, *It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime* (New York: Random House Children's Books, 2019)
20. Trevor Noah, *It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime* (New York: Random House Children's Books, 2019)
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Appendix

Oklahoma Academic Standards

5.3.W.1 NARRATIVE Students will write narratives incorporating characters, plot, setting, point of view, conflict (i.e., internal, external), and dialogue.

5.2.W.1 Students will apply components of a recursive writing process for multiple purposes to create a focused, organized, and coherent piece of writing.

5.2.W.2 Students will plan (e.g., outline) and prewrite a first draft as necessary.

5.2.W.4 Students will edit and revise multiple drafts for intended purpose (e.g., staying on topic), organization, and coherence.

5.3.R.4 Students will evaluate literary devices to support interpretations of literary texts: simile, metaphor, personification, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, imagery, symbolism, and tone. Students will find textual evidence when provided with examples.

5.3.W.4 Students will show relationships among facts, opinions, and supporting details.

Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3.A Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3.B Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3.C Use a variety of transitional words, phrases, and clauses to manage the sequence of events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3.D Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3.E Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.5 With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1-3 up to and including grade 5 here.)

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