

10 writing prompts and exemplars

1. Write a narrative including a dialogue without using the verb ‘to say’. If you are having trouble thinking of a topic to write on, you can do a spin off of a scene from a fairy tale you know well.

Grade: 9-10

Time: 10 minutes

Rationale: Having students use stronger verbs in place of more common/weak verbs will make their writing sound more sophisticated. The narratives can also be performed to give students the sense of what each ‘to say’ verb sounds like in practice. This will give them a better understanding of how and when to characterize dialogue in their writing.

Exemplar:

“Can you pass the butter,” my brother mumbled in the most petulant manner.

Knowing this was an opportunity to push his buttons, I replied with a resounding “speak up John, I can’t hear you!”

“You know exactly what I asked,” John sighed angrily, knowing precisely what I was trying to accomplish.

“I don’t. No one can understand you when you mumble like that,” I snapped back, “maybe try opening your mouth when you speak” I deliberately over-enunciated. The next thing I knew, John was right up in my face.

“PASS THE BUTTER,” he bellowed. If I was only pretending not to hear him beforehand I would never actually hear him now since I should be deaf after that scream.

“Kids, settle down” our mother scolded, “we’re in public.”

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“Sorry Mom,” we moaned in unison. We really weren’t, and we knew she knew the truth.

“Sometimes you kids are so embarrassing” she huffed, my ears still ringing from John’s scream.

2. Write a newspaper/magazine article introducing yourself as a local celebrity. You must write in 3rd person and you must include at least 3 interview questions.

Grade: any

Time: 20 minutes

Rationale: This prompt is meant to be completed at the beginning of a semester. By writing about themselves, students should not have difficulty generating content, but the formal constraints could pose a small challenge, especially if students have not produced any writing for several months. Furthermore, this writing prompt allows me as the teacher to evaluate a baseline of students’ writing while also getting to know them on a more personal level. By having a baseline of writing skills, I will be able to plan appropriate writing exercises for the rest of the semester to help my students improve their writing.

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3. Cubed Poem

Come up with 27 words that are both verbs and nouns. Arrange these words in a poem with 3 stanzas, 3 lines per stanza, and 3 words per line.

Grade: 11-12

Time: 10 minutes

Exemplar:

Nonsense

Dogs cradle kids,

Fish record bears,

Hold sock eye.

Ring phones wave,

Pencil sticks skate,

Run books ride.

Water bottle hit

Massage ruin leeches

Motor blow view

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4. Write a paragraph about what you want to be when you grow up without using the verb ‘to be’.

Grade: 9

Time: 10 minutes

Rationale: Having students use stronger verbs in place of more common/weak verbs will make their writing sound more sophisticated. When the verb ‘to be’ is removed, the most common replacement is ‘to have’, therefore, as an extension activity or in the next class, students could modify their paragraph to remove all versions of the verb ‘to have’.

Exemplar:

Slightly modified from the prompt, I write about why I want to be a teacher

I have several reasons why I want to pursue a career in teaching. These reasons range in complexity and even change from time to time depending on my current situation. I believe that young people hold particular importance in the world of tomorrow and I want them to hold knowledge and skills to progress society in a holistic and sensitive manner. If I can plant the seeds of curiosity and passion in my students, I will see myself as having pursued a successful and worthwhile career. The work teachers take on holds a huge amount of importance and it often goes unrecognized and undervalued. Not only do teachers teach the content of a particular subject, but they also lay the foundation for the future thought patterns and work ethic of their students and society as a whole.

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5. Write 5 sentences beginning with a gerund phrase and 5 sentences beginning with an infinitive verb.

Grade: 10

Time: 15 minutes

Rationale: Sentences beginning with gerund phrases and infinitive verb phrases can help to set the tone for a piece of writing. Gerunds often induce a tone of action and create the sense that the reader is entering the story *en medias res*. Conversely, infinitive verb phrases create a philosophical or metaphoric tone. Being able to determine when and how to use the appropriate tone will help students in creative writing, professional writing, and casual writing.

Exemplar:

Gerund

1. Wading through the swamp the young hunter felt as if he was moving in slow motion
2. Flying through the air, we realized that we were in the hands of a brand new pilot with a questionable aviation background.
3. Shaking with madness, I gave my sister the most intense stare she would ever encounter.
4. Running through the woods I realized there was only one thing standing between myself and certain death: the funhouse.

Infinitive

1. To live in a world of
2. To ski down the mountaintop at full speed is pure bliss.
3. To lie underneath the night sky truly makes one feel small in the world.

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4. To skip in a field is to bring back the child-like joy I had been longing for for several years.

5. To let a drop of water slide down your throat while hiking in the desert is to know life again.

6. Come up with the longest word you can by adding prefixes and suffixes to a root.

Define the word.

Grade: 11-12

Hint: start with the longest word you know then add prefixes and suffixes, keeping in mind their meaning

Time: 10 minutes

Exemplar:

predisantidisestablishmentarianismphobia

Definition: the state before being apart from the part of the person who is afraid of the opposition to the withdrawal of state support from an established church

7. Describe the smell of your favourite place or the taste of your favourite food. You must use at least three four or more syllable adjectives.

Grade: 9

Time: 5 minutes

Rationale: By describing a familiar concept in an abstract way while paying close attention to detail students will become more comfortable writing in the abstract and also using stronger adjectives. The paragraphs can also be read aloud, encouraging students

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to place emphasis on the adjectives to help them understand how using stronger adjectives contributes to their writing.

Exemplar:

Description of being in the mountains

When I inhale the atmosphere through my nose it is as if the **gargantuan** trees around me are pushing oxygen straight out of their trunks and immediately into my nose. This is the constant intake of two **invisible** oxygen molecules at a time. Pure naivety is what I smell. The smell of **adventurous** innocence is in the air, because the air has not yet been subject to the pollution of the urban world before it becomes mine. Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. Breathe in. Breathe out. It is the smell of the **manufactured** cedar car air freshener you buy at the gas station, but so much more real and pure because that's exactly what it is. Real. The place around me holds so much, but the smell is so little. Like explaining the taste of water. It simply is.

8. Write as many words you can think of that can be used in place of the verb 'to walk' (hint: think of how different animals walk).

Grade: any

Time: 5 minutes

Rationale: If students can use stronger verbs, their writing will sound more sophisticated.

Walk is quite a common verb; however, in writing it tells the reader nothing about the manner in which the character walks, potentially leaving the piece bland. Being able to generate a list of words that add character to the verb 'to walk' will prove to students that they know these words and can easily incorporate them into their writing.

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Exemplar:

Stroll	Strut	Slither	March	Trot
Skip	Wander	Tip-toe	Sneak	Glide
Stride	Move	Mosey	Amble	Saunter
Hike	Plod	Trek	Tread	Promenade
Patrol	Sashay	Escort	Usher	Roam
Stomp	Perambulate	Bounce	Stumble	Hobble
Limp	Pace	Prance	Stalk	Shuffle
Traverse	Waddle	Trudge		

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9. Write a paragraph about what it feels like to participate in your favourite sport or activity. You must use an alliteration of at least 3 words in each sentence.

Grade: 10

Time: 10 minutes

Rationale: Being able to use poetic devices in prosaic writing will help students to sound more confident and eloquent in their use of language. By focusing on familiar content, students are able to focus on the alliterative element of this exercise. It is especially helpful for ELL students who may be struggling to sound fluent in their writing. Using poetic devices in writing will force them to think in English rather than translating from their native language, as the vocab will be different and what is alliterative in one language likely will not be in another.

Exemplar:

As I slide across the slick cement and feel the wind wishing through my hair, I feel pure joy permeate through every bone in my body. Free falling forward towards no particular destination, forcing myself to enjoy the moment for face value. For me, road riding recreates a world where times were simple, where nothing mattered except the here and now. I am completely and utterly infatuated with the road: winding, weaving, and wobbling at every turn. My legs labouriously lend love to my heart as the pedal with the rhythms of Southwest Marine Drive. The smell of salt water splashing through the air, the sweat sliding down my face, and the wash of the wind against my face makes me feel invincible. There is nothing else that makes me feel so marvelously manic.

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10. Generate as many four (or more) syllable adjectives as you can.

Grade: 10-12

Time: 5 minutes

Rationale: Being able to use longer and more effective adjectives gives strength to students' writing. By having an 'adjective bank' to draw from on future writing exercises, it prevents them from reaching for easy and overused descriptors, such as 'nice'.

Exemplar:

Responsibly	Actually	Benevolent	Adventurous
Adorable	Continuous	Fashionable	Provocative
Insensitive	Energetic	Fundamental	Negotiable
Questionable	Inquisitive	Independent	Polarizing
Debatable	Hilarious	Harmonious	Invincible

Advantageous	Deplorable	Superfluous	Regrettable
Unresponsive	Invisible	Voluntary	