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ABSTRACT

The teaching activities presented in these articles integrate language skills in a variety of ways. The articles describe assignments about (1) using road signs to help students realize the importance of reading the signs they encounter; (2) integrating reading, speech, writing, and art, with pet dragons as the subject;. (3) focusing on reading and writing directions; (4) constructing "people sentences" for increasing the understanding of sentence structure; and (5) suggesting that students write about what's on their minds to help them focus on real experiences and develop confidence in their writing. (EL)

Language Everywhere

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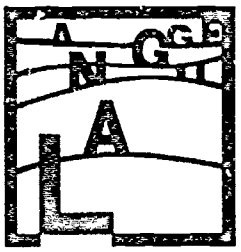
National Council of Teachers of English



LANGUAGE EVERYWHERE

Reading for Safety

Do students see road signs on their way to school? Do they read them? What kinds of messages do the signs give?

It's never too early for students to learn safe habits for walking, biking, and riding in cars, in our society, safety on the road necessitates being aware of the messages and warnings posted around us. In "Reading for Safety," students talk about the messages on the signs that they see every day. By examining and discussing the information offered, students realize the importance of reading the signs that they encounter.

After posing questions such as the ones suggested, ask students to record the messages from five or ten signs before the next class period. They can either jot down the messages on their way to and from school or make a special trip around the neighborhood with a notebook in hand.

At the start of the next class period, ask students if they noticed any signs that they had never paid attention to before. If so, what were the signs? Were the messages important? Students can read aloud their lists, which will probably include messages such as *Stop, Don't Walk, Yield,* and *Children Crossing,* and they can exchange ideas on why each message is posted, where it is usually posted, and what would happen if no one read the sign. Challenge students to explain the purpose of other less familiar sign messages such as *Soft Shoulder, Height: 13' 5",* and *Maximum Weight: 3 Tons,* and to offer ideas on what would happen if these messages were ignored.

Next, ask students to think about the way language is used in the messages they listed by asking the following questions:

What do the messages have in common?

Why are they all so brief?

What would happen if each sign offered a paragraph of explanation?

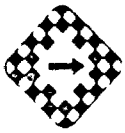
You may want to ask students if they know what type of information is associated with each color used on signs along the highway. (Brown is for information about parks and points of interest; green is for information about exits, distances to other cities, and interchanges, and blue is for information about hospitals.)

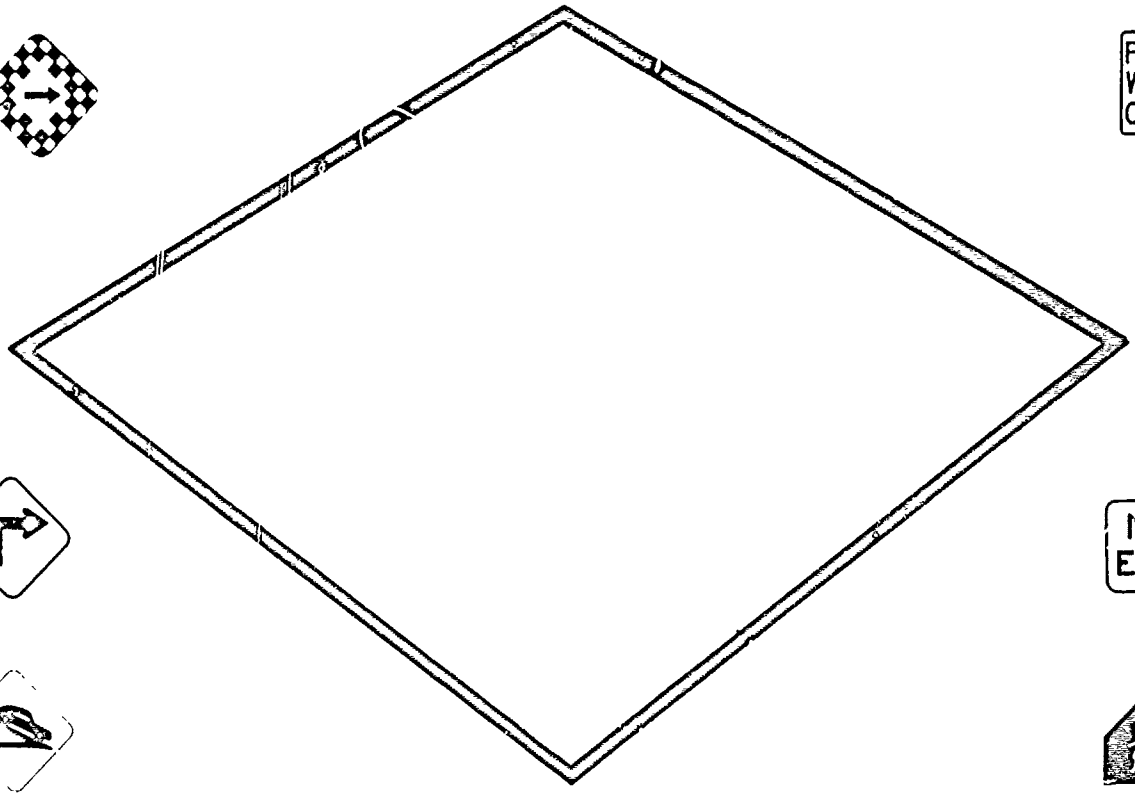
Finally, give students a chance to create signs of their own using copies of the handout on page 3. They can then post their signs in the classroom or at appropriate locations in the school. Students are free to think up original messages as long as they use the same simple, concise style that is found in the messages they have talked about in class. Students may want to write warnings such as "Watch out for spilled water," or they may prefer to provide information such as "School library is 2 doors down on your left."

After writing their messages on their signs and adding illustrations, students decide on appropriate locations for their signs. When all the signs are posted, students tour the classroom or school to read the advice that their classmates have given them.

Maria Valeri-Gold, Marietta, Georgia

Write Your Own Signs Here



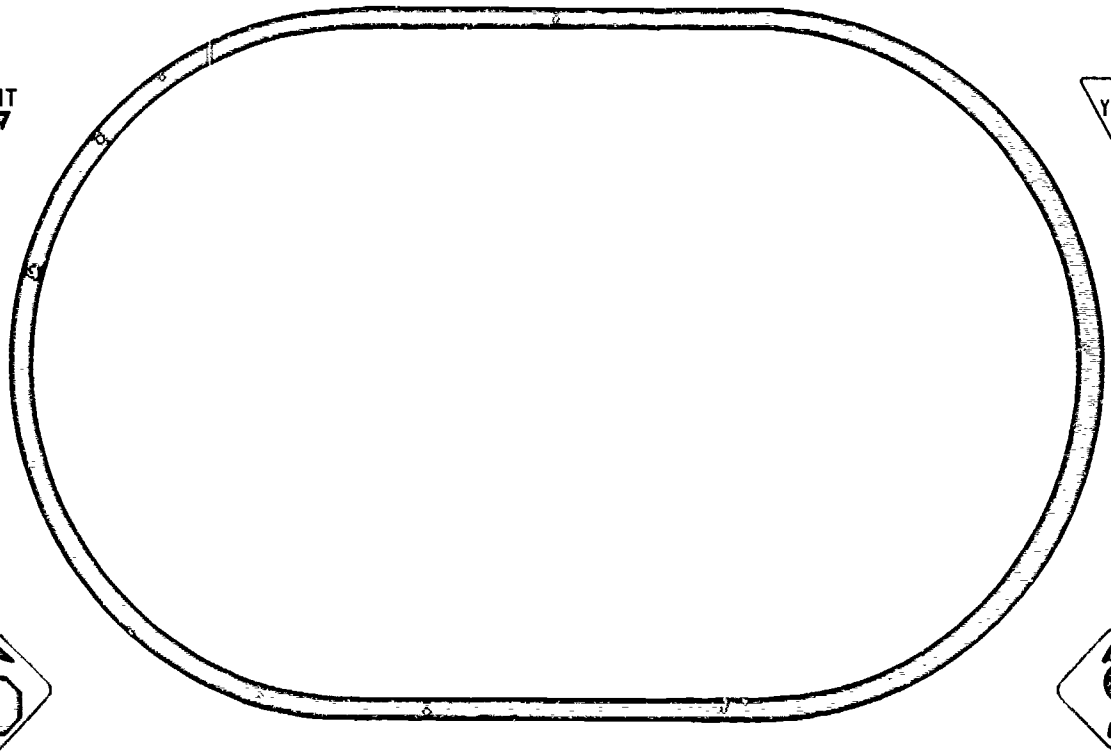


PASS WITH CARE

NO EXIT

HILL

SCHOOL



EXIT

YIELD

Our Very Own Dragons

"Would you like a dragon for a pet?" When you ask this question of first graders, you are likely to hear a lively debate covering the pros and cons of dragon ownership. This question and others introduce students to an activity integrating reading, discussing, writing, and art, an activity that gives them a chance to create their very own dragons.

Students' imaginations are stimulated when they read books about dragons. As they plan and construct their own Play-Doh dragons, they find it natural to talk and write about what they are doing. By writing as well as they can without worrying about spelling, sentence structure, or handwriting, they take full advantage of what they know about language. As an added benefit, a group reading session helps students to discover that they are capable of reading their own writings to their classmates.

Introduce the activity by asking students such questions as:

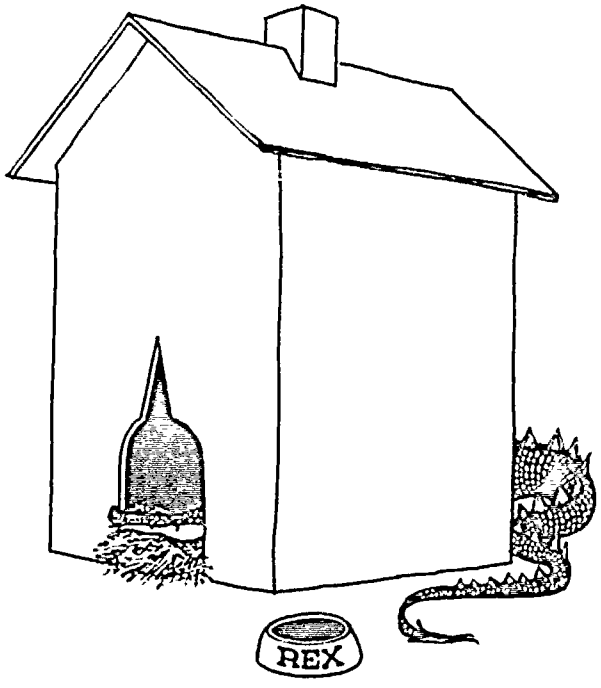
Do any of you have pets?

Would you like a dragon as a pet?

What special powers do dragons have?

If you had a dragon, what would you and the dragon do for fun?

After students share some of their own ideas about dragons, pass around several storybooks that feature dragons. A book such as Tomi de Paolo's *The Knight and the Dragon* (Putnam, 1980) may be best used in a small group, where students can work through the simple text at their own pace and talk about the meaning of each picture. Students may want to examine other books such as Jack Kent's *There's No Such Thing as a Dragon* (Golden Press, 1975) and Ned Delaney's *One Dragon to Another* (Houghton Mifflin, 1979) and then hear these books read aloud.



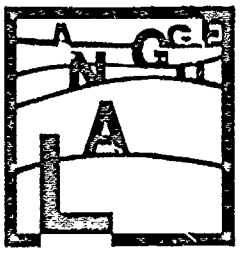
Spend a little time discussing the books, asking students how dragons are presented in each book, and finding out what they liked best in each. Then ask students to create their own dragons. Student volunteers can help you pass out portions of Play-Doh or homemade clay (the recipe can be found in most primary craft guides), pipe cleaners, pasta twists, split green peas, and dried beans.

As students shape and decorate their dragons, the comments they make among themselves are likely to be about the things that their dragons can do and about the various body features that they are giving their dragons. Encourage them to talk too about how their dragons will be similar to or different from the dragons in the books.

When students finish constructing their dragons, give them a chance to put down in writing some of the ideas that they discussed as they worked. Whether students want to write stories, paragraphs, or captions for drawings, make sure that they don't worry too much about spelling or neatness. Have crayons and markers on hand so that students can illustrate their papers, and encourage them to share their work with classmates sitting nearby. Then when students have recorded all that they want to say about their dragons, they can gather together on a reading rug (or the equivalent) and take turns reading their stories aloud and showing their drawings. Students should be able to read almost all of what they've written (though some may stumble a bit at first), and they obviously enjoy the chance to communicate with an appreciative audience.

If you can obtain the use of a camera that provides instant prints, preserve the moment by taking a picture of each student with his or her clay dragon. The clay dragons can be displayed on a table at the side of the room, and the photographs and the students' writings and drawings can be posted on the bulletin board under the label "Our Very Own Dragons."

Connie Weaver, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan



LANGUAGE EVERYWHERE

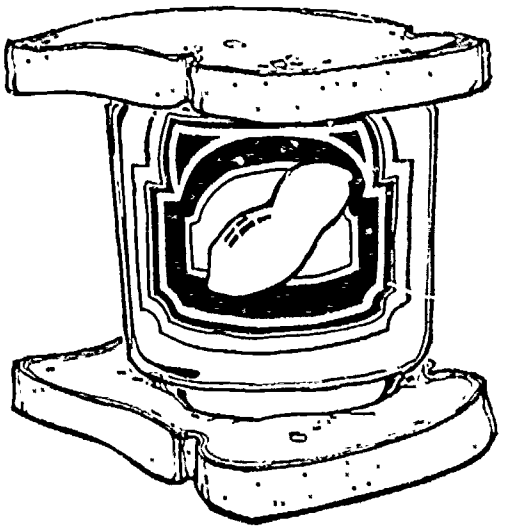
Reading and Writing Directions

Students might be surprised to know that they aren't the only ones who have to "read the directions." In fact, hardly anyone gets through a day without following some sort of written instructions—whether on a tax form, a bus schedule, a cake mix, or a vending machine. Writing instructions requires using language clearly and precisely and makes a good basis for an activity focusing on language and problem solving. "Reading and Writing Directions" takes two class periods. In the first, students analyze a specific task, determine the steps necessary to accomplish it, as well as the correct sequence, and phrase the instructions in their own words. Then, during the second class period, you or a student volunteer "tests" the clarity of the directions by reading and following them in front of the class. This way you give the authors a chance to observe, discuss, and revise their directions in order to make the instructions more accurate.

In preparation, assemble the following items in a grocery bag:

peanut butter
paper plate
jelly
two slices of bread
plastic knife
plastic spoon
napkin

Tape the bag shut and label one side "Ingredients for Making a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich."



On Day One, bring the grocery bag to class and walk around the room holding it up so that students can read the label. Explain that all the ingredients necessary for the preparation of the sandwich are in the bag—except for the directions, which they are to provide. First, let students speculate a bit on what might be in the bag, based on its size and shape, and then remove the items one by one and place them on a table where all can see.

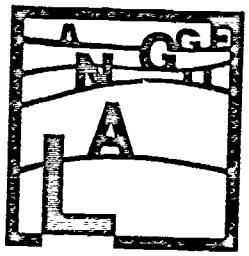
Next, divide the class into groups of three or four students and ask them to use their problem-solving talents to plan their directions. They need to think of the task as a series of steps and to determine what is necessary to accomplish *each individual step*. (Tell students that when you or a student volunteer follows their directions in front of the class, you will not do anything that is not specified in the directions. So even though the task is a familiar one, students will need to think carefully to avoid leaving out any steps.) After discussing the individual steps involved in making a sandwich, the group members decide how they want to phrase each step to make it as clear as possible, and one member of the group writes down and numbers the steps. Make sure students know that their instructions must make use of all the items from the bag. (If possible, give each group a transparency on which to copy their final set of instructions. This will save you the trouble of copying each group's instructions onto the board.)

On Day Two, after all the groups have planned and written their directions, project the first group's transparency or write the directions on the board, and read the directions aloud or have a volunteer read them aloud. You or a volunteer from another group then uses the items in the bag to follow the instructions to the letter, sometimes with hilarious results. (Have a loaf of bread on hand; at least two slices per group will be needed.) I pass each completed sandwich to the group that authored the directions and allow them to divide and enjoy it as they revise their directions.

As each set of directions was "tested" in my classroom, I asked students to make comments and suggestions as to how the directions could be improved. Are there any steps that are unclear? Are the steps in the right order? Is any step left out? The most often rewritten step was "Put the peanut butter on the bread." Why? Because students often forgot to mention that the jar must first be opened!

Cathy Dugdale, Racine, Wisconsin

April 1985



LANGUAGE EVERYWHERE

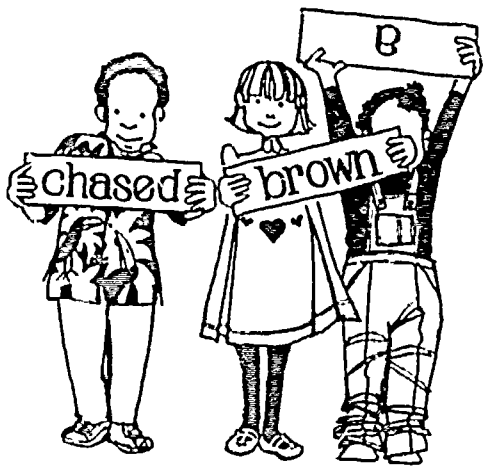
People Sentences

Purpose:
- to discuss ways sentences are put together
- to see how much is already known about sentences
- to further develop a sense of sentence structure

Grade Level: 2–4

Materials:
- ten 6" × 18" cards cut out of posterboard, each bearing one of the following words: *a, the, and, funny, brown, clown, dog, ran, chased, away*
- several blank cards

Select ten volunteers from the class to be words in a "people sentence" and give each student a card. Ask these students to arrange themselves into a sentence and then to face the class holding their cards. Then, following directions from you or the class, the "people sentence" rearranges its word order in various ways, and the class discusses each new sentence variation. You will need to tailor your discussion to suit the actual sentences that are created, but the following discussion will serve as an example.



Suppose that your students form the sentence "a brown dog chased the funny clown and ran away." Point out to the students that their feeling for sentence structure is good.

Next, ask the students holding the words *dog* and *clown* to exchange places. Now the sentence reads, "a brown clown chased the funny dog and ran away." Ask students if this is a sentence. Most will say yes. Then tell the students holding the words *brown* and *clown* to change places. The result: "a clown brown chased the funny dog and ran away." Ask students if this is a sentence. This time you'll probably get a mix of yesses and noes. Pose questions to help students to think about their answers: What is it that bothers the students who said no? Does it sound more natural to say "brown clown"? Explain that sometimes changing the order of just a few words in a sentence can change the feeling of the sentence and even its meaning.

Students in the audience may want to be in charge of designing sentences themselves. After the "people sentence" changes its word order, ask members of the class what they think of the result. Ask them if the sentence makes sense.

Finally, ask them what they would have to do to make the sentence into a question. Ask if there is more than one way to do this. Interested students can use the blank cards to write extra words needed to form a question, and then can arrange all the cards into a question.

In using this exercise, students may well surprise you and themselves, in demonstrating what they can do to make words work together.

Johanna Clinton, Urbana, Illinois

What's on Your Mind?

Purpose.
- to write about real experiences
- to develop confidence by sharing thoughts in a nonjudgmental atmosphere

Grade Level: 2–4

Materials:
- pencils, copies of the handout on page 3

When you encourage students to express "what's on their minds," they are likely to find that what's important to them is important to others, too. Writing on the silhouette of a head, students respond in phrases or sentences to the following:

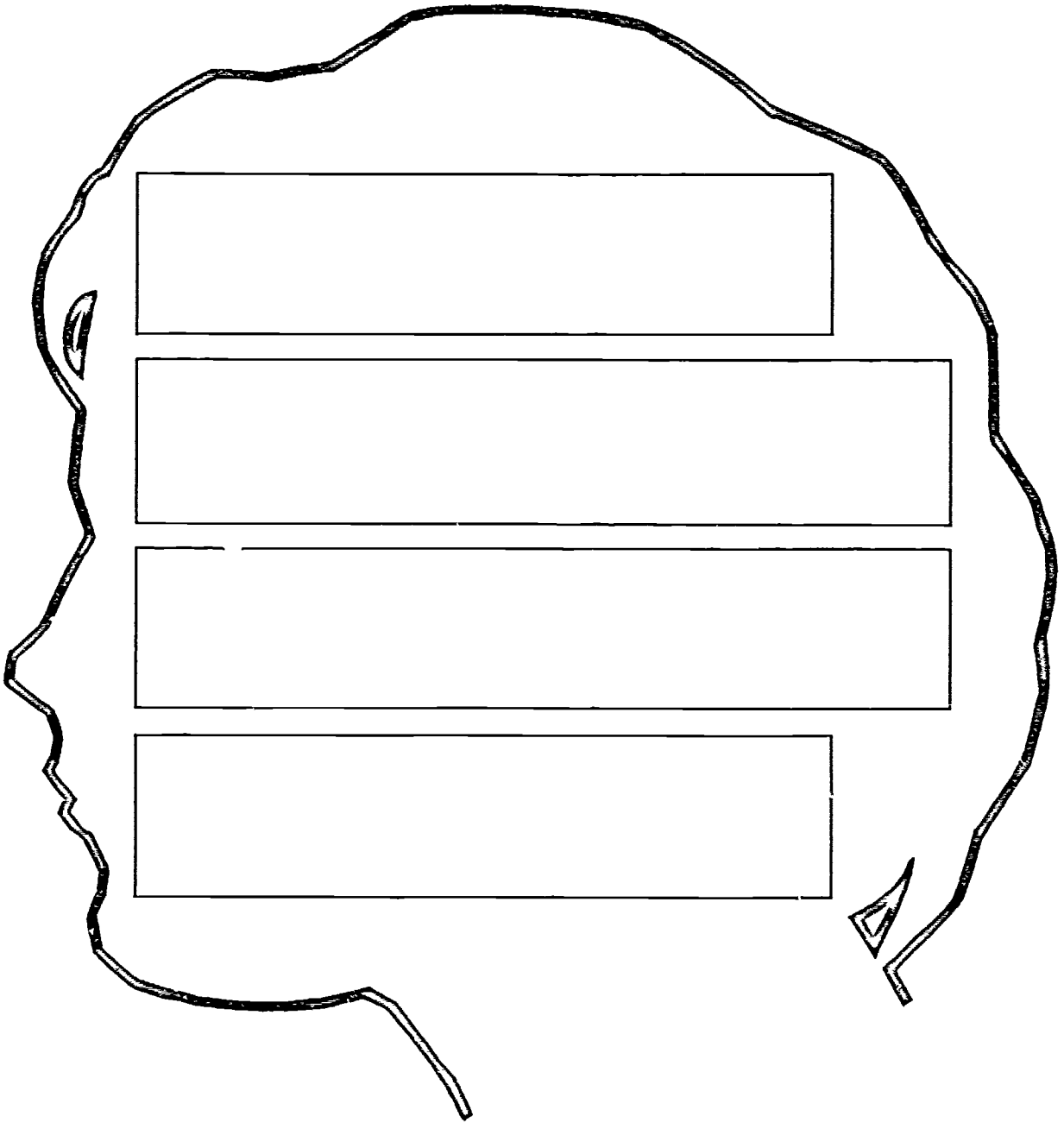
- Describe something that you have kept for years because it has good memories for you.
- Describe your favorite time of year.
- Name something that you do well and something else that you are still learning to do.
- Describe your favorite place to be alone.

When the outlines are filled in, each student will have a record of some of the things that are important to him or her, the same kind of record that a writer creates in writing a poem or story. And you will probably want to fill in a copy of the handout yourself, so that you can take turns with your students in reading aloud your responses.

Whether you ask students to share in pairs or as a whole class, comparing common answers and explaining responses puts students more at ease with self-expression. This activity is a good warm-up for a journal-writing session or a creative writing project.

Adele Fiderer, Scarsdale Public Schools, Scarsdale, New York

What's on Your Mind?



Use the boxes above to write your ideas.

1. Describe something that you have kept for years because it has good memories for you.
2. Describe your favorite time of year.
3. Name something that you do well and something else that you are still learning to do.
4. Describe your favorite place to be alone.