

CALIFORNIA WRITING PROJECT

Teacher-to-Teacher Curriculum Resources

California Writing



Who and What Defines You?
Making Choices in California

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california writing is a statewide program of the california writing project.

This project invites students to examine their lives and the choices they have made and to determine which influences in their lives—especially influences from living in California—shape and define them. In a culminating writing task, students choose which written genre will best communicate what they want to say about who they are as a Californian in the city in which they live.

Genre: Student choice of poetry, analytic essays, memoirs, letters, reflective essays, or one-act plays

Recommended grade levels: 7-12

Overview

We spend much of the year in senior English focused on analyzing novels, poems, stories, plays, and essays. Our analysis centers on studying the choices authors make and why they make those particular choices. For example, we analyze the connections among the author's choices for topic, genre, purpose, and audience. All of this is designed to help students begin to make some of their own choices in their own writing.

Most of our study however, leads to discussions about how authors reveal and develop characters. We discuss how an author develops the motivations of characters, both external and internal, and explicit or implicit, and what factors shape the decisions they make. We also examine how the author and the author's narrator speak to us as readers and what they are trying to tell us. While reading literature as varied as Hamlet, Alice In Wonderland, Frankenstein, and "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," we talk about why particular characters choose action or inaction, how these pieces help us explore why we tell our stories, and what it means for all of us to create who we are. In all of these literary works, for example, we find that if we don't make decisions about who we are, we let society define us. Furthermore, all of these pieces end with one of the characters telling a story or asking someone to tell the story. Naturally, class discussions move from studying the characters to looking at ourselves. But rarely do students get the opportunity to write the stories and essays that emerge as possibilities out of our classroom discussions.

This culminating assignment—after the students had written "tons" (their word) of analytical essays during the year—gave my students an opportunity to turn the focus away from studying literary characters and put it on themselves instead. The assignment was an invitation to take a long look at their lives, to examine the choices they have made, and to determine the influences in their lives and in their communities along the Central Coast and in the state of California. It was also an invitation to explore the genre, audience, and purpose that had the best fit with their choice of topic.

For my students, this took advantage of the reflective place seniors occupy before graduation and their often uncertain next steps. For others, this project could be the basis of an exploration into the questions that underpin all the CWP Teacher-to-Teacher projects: "What does it mean to be a Californian in my family, school, and community? What has shaped who I am as a Californian? What is the California I hope to see in the future?"

Objectives

Students will:

- elevate their awareness of the influences of their community
- connect characterization in literature to characterizations of themselves
- understand the role of genre in conveying ideas and stories for a specific audience
- rethink and identify the genre possibilities for quick writes that help them generate written material
- collaborate with different groups of students to help others determine choices of genre and topic and audience
- publish a piece of writing that reveals characterization of self for a specific audience.

Applications to the California State Standards

☐ Ninth/Tenth Grades

Reading

3.0 Literary Response and Analysis

- Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science. They conduct in-depth analyses of recurrent patterns and themes.

Writing

1.9 Evaluation and Revision

- Revise writing to improve the logic and coherence of the organization and controlling perspective, the precision of word choice, and the tone by taking into consideration the audience, purpose, and formality of the context.

2.1 Write biographical or autobiographical narratives or short stories

2.4 Write persuasive compositions

☐ Eleventh/Twelfth Grades

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Writing

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- Revise text to highlight the individual voice, improve sentence variety and style, and enhance subtlety of meaning and tone in ways that are consistent with the purpose, audience, and genre.

2.3 Write reflective compositions.

2.1 Write biographical or autobiographical narratives or short stories.

Teaching Sequence

Note: This project was completed by both AP English IV and Sheltered English IV students.

❑ Prewriting:

- Write the following prompt on the board: What does it mean to be a Californian in Castroville, Prunedale, or Aptos?
- Brainstorm: On chart paper, create a list of people and things that have influenced the students. Post this paper for later access and reference.
- Tell students that in order to begin writing about this prompt, they will be making a choice of topic and genre.

❑ Generating quick writes to respond to the prompt:

- Hand out the list of the questions that follow to help students stimulate their thinking. Explain that these questions are not the only ones they might use to begin exploring their response to the prompt. Ask many students to help read this list of questions aloud and invite students to add their own questions to the list.

Note: I include the references to quotations and the literary pieces, so the students see the connections between the literature they have analyzed previously and this assignment.

California Identities: Who and what define you? Making choices for yourself.

Maya Angelou (paraphrased) “Wherever I go, I take everyone who has meant something to me along with me. See them; they are all here.”

Hamlet: “To be or not to be.” Being is action not inaction. “Tell my story,” Hamlet says to Horatio.

Alice In Wonderland: Alice tells the story of her dream to her sister.

“Rime of the Ancient Mariner”: The Ancient Mariner tells his story to people he thinks should hear it.

Frankenstein: Frankenstein acts; however, just because he can doesn’t mean he should.

In all of the literature above, we find the following theme: If we don’t make decisions about who we are, we let society define us.

- What do people tell you to think, and what do you think?
- Do you compare where you live with somewhere else? How does that influence your life? Do you want to get out of your community? Why or why not?
- How does language influence your life?
- Your family or community history—How does either affect who you are?
- Does the weather in this area influence you? How?
- What do you think other people think of you? Does that influence what you think of yourself?
- Do you feel a connection to the land or the water around you? How does that influence your life?
- What is important to you? Why? How does that influence what you do and think? (e.g. religion, cultural traditions, clothes, music, family, education, etc.)
- Where do you go and what do you do for fun? Why? How does that help to define who you are?
- What do you hear, smell and see in your community? How does that affect who you are? Why are these important in your life?
- Metaphors—What is California to you? A color, day of the week, car? Explain your metaphor.
- Stereotyping—How do people see you? Are they correct?
- Relationships with your whole family or one of your family members—How do these relationships influence your life?
- Grandparents’ and/or parents’ sacrifices—What were the sacrifices? How do they influence who you are?

- Who do you see around your neighborhood? How are they like or unlike you?
- With what group(s) do you identify? What are the common characteristics of that group? How did you find that group? How does this group help you to define who you are?
- Food— How does this influence your life?
- Why did you come here? How did you come here?
- What work do you do? Why?
- What is an issue in California that you feel strongly about? Why is it important to you? What do you think should be changed? How?
- What is a problem you see in California? Why is it important to you? What do you think should be changed? How do you think that should be done?
- What is an aphorism (traditional saying) or deep belief that you carry with you? Where did you get that? How has it influenced your life?
- Whom do you admire or not admire? How has that person helped to make you who you are?
- What poem, story or book has influenced your life? How has that writing helped to make you who you are or who you will be?
- How does your physical appearance influence who you are?
- How has money and the way that you or your family get it influence who you are?
- How does the news in your area influence who you are?
- Sports—What sport in your area influences who you are?
- How does politics influence who you and your family are?
- Did your community service, your job shadowing, or your service learning project influence your thinking about yourself?

□ Quick Writing

Note: Most people think a quick write is just a paragraph, but I have found that students often choose a genre that is different from a traditional paragraph to help them record their thoughts quickly.

- Choosing a topic: Tell the students to choose a question or questions from the list or to create their own topic to write about. Remind them that they are exploring in writing how to reveal something about their own identities.
- Brainstorming: On chart paper, brainstorm a list of genres that students could use to begin the quick write about one of the questions—list of bulleted points, graphic organizer, story, poem, a stream of consciousness piece. Title the list, Quick Write Genres, and post it for students' use alongside the brainstormed list of influences.
- Choosing the genre: Tell them to choose the genre that best helps them to express their thoughts quickly. Give them time to talk with the person sitting beside them to help to make this choice.
- Quick writing: Tell the students that often we do not know what we are thinking until we get our pencils moving. Give them plenty of time, telling them they have fifteen minutes (or the time you specify, of course) to write in response to the question, using a topic and a genre of their choice.

Note concerning EL students: After introducing this assignment to my Sheltered English IV class, I saw many confused looks. I knew that they needed modeling to help them to decide what to write about and what genre to choose. To start, I wrote this short genre list-- story, poem, list, stream of consciousness, graphic organizer. However, it wasn't until I actually began modeling the writing that I realized the possible range of genre choices I was expecting them to recall and understand, even though we had worked with many previously.

On separate pieces of big chart paper I wrote beginnings for the following pieces while the students watched and listened to my thinking:

- a list of people and places that I love on the Central Coast
- a story about why and how I came to be living here
- a web graphic organizer, containing what I love and do not love about where I live now

- a stream of consciousness piece about a homeless person who has been a huge influence in my life
- a chart comparing Prunedale to my hometown of Springs, Pennsylvania,
- a poem about going down the hill from my house, showing what I see, hear, and think.

As I wrote the beginning of each piece, I realized the question I chose, determined the genre I chose to address each one. As I wrote, I shared this realization with the students. I taped these pieces of chart paper to the front board, inviting the students to use their own ideas and stories to begin their own pieces. I also told them to take a few minutes to talk with each other to clarify the assignment and their own thoughts about the choices they would make. Then I gave them twenty minutes to write. A few of the students decided to use the questions and genres I had begun on the chart papers. Sometimes, EL students just need a little more scaffolding to get started.

Student Samples

The following student samples are final drafts of some of the quick writes. They are snapshots of some students' lives, revealing how our Central Coast has affected who they are.

"The Grease Murders" by Melissa Steimle

(Note the references to picking and processing vegetables in our area.)

Grown below in California, birthed through the womb of nature
Picked and cleaned
Shaped to the desired size
Do they know I exist?
Packed to the perfect weight, the perfect taste
Shipped frozen, blinded, sealed
Our shoulders touch, I cannot breathe
Is this life?
Destination is reached
A journey ends, but a new one begins
Placed in a room with others like me
Am I my own?
I hear the calling, the door opens
Air reaches me and I breathe
Dropped into an endless machine
Have I become a robot?
It burns all around me
I want to get out
A beeper sounds and I am lifted
Is this the end?
Placed in the heat as whiteness falls
Served as an individual
Eaten alive
Buried below in California in the manure of nature.

An excerpt from **"Life Has Made Me Stronger"** by Adriana Cruz
(Adriana reveals how tradition and her work influence her.)

I am Mexican, and I am a girl. In Mexico, people think that girls should not study. They say that girls have to be at home, taking care of their families. In the summer the weather is hot; some days I worked picking strawberries from six am until six pm under a shiny sun. One day I felt so tired, with all the sweat coming down from my forehead. That day was the most important day in my life, because I made the biggest decision that I ever made. I decided that I would study and have a career, no matter how hard it would be. . . . As I bent over to pick up the strawberries, I thought that each strawberry that I was picking was a step toward my goal. . . . Life has made me the strong Mexican woman that will never give up.

"Am Sorry Mom" by Jaime Torres.
(Jaime writes a letter to his mother.)

Now they lay me down to sleep.
Protect me, mother, from those who creep around my sleep
To snatch me from my restful dreams. Now I lie peaceful, so it seems.
I know there's Bad things I have Done
That's why I'm sleeping with my gun
But if my life is to be taken
Just leave me in my drams never to be awakened.

My whole life is a constant struggle
From my starting point to the end.
Got me thinking like a gangster
Sick of being treated like a slave
I must behave like a criminal
Because this world keeps getting colder.

Forgive me mother
But you alone knows the places I have been
The words that I heard and the actions I have seen
Made me learn how to shoot a gun before I could read
You and only you know what I had to do in order to survive in these streets.

Is there repentance for your son?
Is there a heaven?
Could I give you a hug?
Am sorry mom.

Teaching Sequence Continued

❑ **Response groups:**

Put students into small groups of 3-4, so they can read their quick writes aloud. Tell the students in the groups to tell each author something that they like about the piece. As each author hears the group's comment, she/he should write them down on his/her paper. When I collect these quick writes, I read those comments to see what groups and which students may need my help and specific feedback. (You could ask some students to read their quick writes to the class if the groups are particularly impressed.) This activity gives students more ideas about genre choices and topics they could decide to use for their final pieces.

❑ **Choosing a genre for a published piece:**

Return the quick writes. With the whole class, brainstorm and chart a broader list of genres than the students' list of quick writes, one that includes "publishable" genres: poem, problem-solution essay, controversial issue essay, memoir, letter, documentary with still photographs or video, reflective essay, or even a one-act play. Explain how you could write about your town in a poem, a letter, an essay, a story, or a collection of photographs. Explain how a list could become a poem and how a graphic organizer could become a letter. Post this list of genres alongside the other lists.

❑ **Going Public—Audience and Purpose:**

Explain that for this assignment they will be required to publish. Review the concept of purpose, explaining how the author's purpose must meet the needs of the audience. You may want to keep this simple by using the following list of purposes—to inform, to persuade, to entertain. Then brainstorm a list of possible audiences for each of these purposes on chart paper. You may have some in mind, too. My students' list of audiences included their parents, a class of juniors, the school's newspaper, a personal web site, an anthology for our class, the city library, and the school's web site. Explain how audience can determine genre and content and that they should choose the genre that best conveys the intended meaning and emotions for a specific audience of their choosing. For example, I remind students that if they write a letter to their mother that will be published in an anthology, they would not include personal secrets they only want their mother to know. Post this chart along with the others, listing genre and topics so that students can make informed choices.

❑ **Determining genre and writing memos:**

Put the students in the same groups they worked with previously. Explain the groups' work below before they begin their discussion.

Note: This ensures that they understand how you are holding them accountable. These memos help me to identify students who need more help than their group gave them.

- The group is to help each person decide the most effective genre to use for the topic and audience(s) chosen for the final published piece. Discuss the characterization in each piece.
- After the group meets, each student in the group will write a memo to you, the teacher, about the group's effectiveness. They should write these memos immediately following the group's meeting. Write the following questions on the board for students to answer in their memos: "What topic, audience(s), purpose, and genre did you choose? What characterization methods did you use? Did your group effectively help you to make

those choices? Who in your group helped you the most? What help did that person give you? Do you have any other comments about your group work?"

❑ First drafts and next-day response:

Tell students to begin a first draft of their piece in class; they will finish at home. Tell them that they don't have to take their group's advice if it was not helpful. The following day ask the same small groups to meet, so everyone can read their pieces aloud. Ask each reader to request revision comments from the group and to write those comments down.

Note: I sit with groups and model how to give good advice throughout the year. Also, I read the written comments on the pieces to monitor which groups are giving helpful suggestions.

❑ Revising in partners:

Put students into pairs with a partner who was not in the original response group. Explain that each writer should first describe the topic, audience, purpose, characterization, and genre for the piece. Explain that each pair should discuss the effectiveness of the choice of genre. I ask for a quick memo after this meeting to let me know if students thought they received the feedback they needed. This meeting with someone who has not seen the piece before gives students the opportunity to see their pieces through different eyes.

Note: In both classes, some students decided to change genres. Four students decided to change from stories to poems. They told me that their groups helped them to see that the imagery and feelings they were using could be best expressed in poetry. Three students decided to write letters instead of essays. I helped a student during lunch who said his partner wasn't much help. I knew he loved photography. He had written a little paragraph about being a war photojournalist that seemed to be without passion. I asked him if he would like to use a photograph to express what influenced that decision in his life. His eyes lit up, and the next day, he had a photograph, mounted on a board with a pithy annotation written on it, "Society can propel some to success and can drag others to failure. It all depends on how the person uses his or her environment."

❑ Editing in small groups:

Put students in their original group to edit for correctness. The final drafts are turned in with the entire packet of pieces, including the quick write(s) and all drafts.

❑ Publishing:

Ask if students want to publish by reading their piece aloud. Along with the going public ideas above, reading personal pieces aloud in class is a powerful community builder. Next year I plan to have a public reading in our school library, another way to publish.

Student Sample

Mine is California

Nobody knows this land like I do.

No one.

But I have seen the shadows of its earth under the night's brightness,

Tasted the sweat of the wind the days the sun won't rest.

Only I have been a witness to its water's true color.

I alone have been there to see the palm trees coil in their dance to echoes of the air.

Nobody understands you like I do.

No, nobody.

But I have seen you reprimand the frightened waves,

Torn and savored your fruit straight from your womb.

I have seen you glow with pride when painting over the night into the day.
I am the one that has tasted the life in you, I have smelled your green,
I have wept under your tears.
Nobody knows me like you do.
No one.
But you have heard me whisper into the dark when I am alone.
You alone know my deepest thoughts,
My sadness, my joy.
Only you have been there always. You are my oldest memory, my oldest friend.
And I alone stand at the edge of your endless water,
Knowing that you are mine, and mine alone.
I am home.

by Patricia Lopez

For more information about how to order classroom copies of the 2005 CWP California Writing Anthology, link to <http://californiawritingproject.org/teachers/anthologies.html>.

Recommended Instructional Resources

- ❑ Wares, Donna, ed. *My California: Journeys by Great Writers*. Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2004.

This anthology is a collection of reflective essays by contemporary authors across California, most of them writing about who they are as a Californian in a specific community. Purchasing it is also a contribution to the California Council for the Arts.

Recommended Professional Resources

- ❑ Fox, Helen. *Listening to the World*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994.
- ❑ Freedman, Aviva, and Porter Medway, eds. *Learning and Teaching Genre*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.

About the Teacher Consultant

Louann Baker, a CWP teacher leader and Associate Director for the Central California Writing Project, has designed instructional materials to teach text structure and has presented these in workshops for more than ten years. She has a Master's Degree in English and a Reading Specialist credential and has participated in statewide writing research projects, including a four-year collaboration with CWP in the Improving Students' Academic Writing evaluation study. She currently teaches AP Literature, ESL, Sheltered English, and CAHSEE Preparation at North Monterey County High School.

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