

Creative Writing Across All the Senses

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This paper introduces some simple and effective techniques for engaging students' imaginations and interest more fully in their writing. In order to highlight the importance of involving the senses in the creative writing and other learning processes, the paper also examines the role that the senses play in our imagination and the activation of a greater area of the brain.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will introduce several simple and effective technique for engaging students' imaginations and interest more fully in their writing. In order to highlight the importance of involving the senses in the creative writing and other learning processes, it is useful to examine the role that the senses play in our experience.

As humans, when we experience the world, we experience it entirely through our senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. These are the gateways to the world and to all our experiences, and our entire perception of reality is dependent on this sensory information.

Within the brain, these important sensory mechanisms are represented neurologically, and it is likely that the evolutionary development of our brain has occurred at least partly as a way of representing this sensory inputs in a manner that can improve our survival characteristics.

Light that enters through the eyes enters the optical nerve and eventually ends up being mainly processed by the visual cortex at the back of the head. Sound waves that strike the outer surface of the ear find their way to the auditory cortex on the sides of the heads, located near the ears.

Similarly, our sensations of touch and balance and movement come in through nerve endings all over our bodies and these signals get passed primarily to the somatic and the motor cortices at the top of the head. Taste and smell are processed in the gustatory and olfactory cortex respectively. What is immediately clear is that the processing of sensory input involves large areas of the brain.

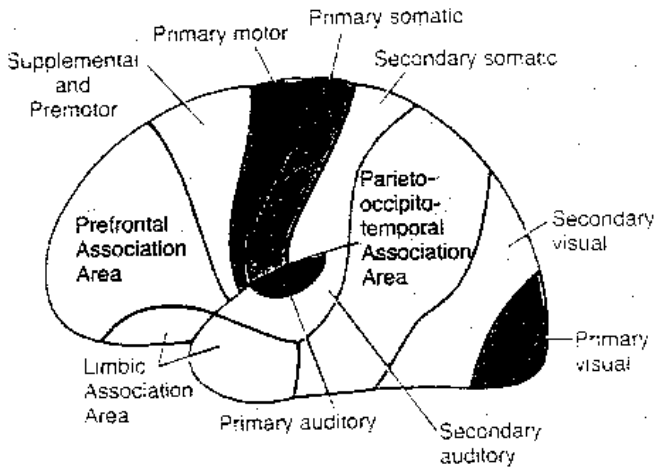


Figure 1 - Sensory Input in the Brain

These cortices and correspondingly large areas of the brain are not only activated by external sensory stimuli. They are also activated by our own internal cognitive processes. For example, when we remember or imagine seeing a beautiful beach, fMRI analysis shows that the visual cortex is activated. In other words, the act of cognitively focusing on either external or internal sensory data activates the corresponding area of the brain. Many cognitive scientists are now suggesting that our whole meaning system is based on this cortical activation. We understand the meaning of the non-sensory word 'beach' by utilizing the visual cortex and creating an internal picture.






Bringing the discussion back to the classroom and creative writing, too often our students are trying to write with ‘words’ and not bringing in the whole powerful sensory apparatus of the brain. When Japanese students are learning English as a foreign language, they are naturally focused on the ‘words’ rather than the sensory representations of those words. At some point for more competent language users, the existing sensory representations of Japanese words begin to become associated with the English words, but for many learners and especially lower-level learners of English, the words are simply non-sensory data which is processed primarily by the frontal cortex without truly activating the sensory cortices of the whole brain.

This paper presents several simple activities for beginning to help students to come back to their senses, i.e. to start noticing the sensory connections and sensory information coming in through the eyes, ears, touch, taste, and smell channels. By deliberately focusing on the sensory information in English, the students can more easily make the associations necessary to bring far greater areas of the brain into their learning.

2. Activity 1

1. Prepare a version of the worksheet shown below. Students have simple icons representing the five senses and space to make notes on several objects or scenes that they find.
2. Take the students out of the classroom. If this is not feasible during class time, this can be assigned as a homework activity. It is definitely more interesting and motivational for students if they are working in pairs or groups.
3. Have students find an interesting place or object outside. For example, they could find a tree or a car or a single leaf. Anything that they choose is appropriate and simply the act of searching for interesting objects is likely to engage most students’ creativity.

4. Have the students take notes in English in each of the sense boxes.
5. Have students return to the classroom. If necessary, give them some time to use dictionaries or the Internet to ensure that their English is correct.
6. Students move around the classroom, sharing their findings with other students. Allow enough time to share with at least five other students. This sharing is also a great spark for creativity and can provide lots of language learning.
7. Optional Follow-up Activities: Have students write a short essay or make a presentation about their findings to the whole class.

3. Activity 2

Prepare a version of the worksheet (Part 1- 3) shown below.

Part 1 - Think about a life event using your senses

In this creative writing activity, you will tell a story from your own life. It

should be an interesting event. It can be sad, happy, or express any other emotion that you like. Make it interesting because other students will be hearing it.

Some possible examples include:

- Winning (or losing) a big sports game
- The day of the entrance exams
- Your first day at Junior High School
- Your first orchestra concert
- Your first kiss!

It is up to you. Please use your imagination and creativity to think of a story from your life that will be interesting to other students.

My Life Event: _____

You must include at least four of the five senses. Write down the senses that you will use. Of course, you can include all five.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. _____

To help you get started including your senses, work with a partner to answer the questions below:

- “What did I see?”
- “What did everyone else see?”
- “What did I hear?”

- “How was I moving my body?”
- “How did I feel?”
- “What smells and tastes were present?”

Of course, there will be more than one answer to each question as the story moves from start to finish.

Part 2 - Plan your story

1. The story must follow the basic development of all good stories. Make brief notes below.

- Introduction

- Character/Place development

- Climax

- Resolution/Look to future

2. Your story must be organized and easy to follow. You should use the past tense, and past progressive.

e.g. I was shaking when I walked up on the stage.

3. Describe how you were feeling in the introduction, during the event, at the climax and at the end must be included. You may use the adjectives below to describe how you were feeling throughout the story, or find your own adjectives. Choose 2 adjectives for each.

Examples:

Scared, Bored, Unhappy, Ecstatic, Furious, Alone, Exhausted, Loving, Crazy, Excited, Timid, Talkative, Quiet, Sad, Jealous, Relaxed, Grateful, Forgiving, Shy

In the beginning of the story I felt: _____ and _____

In the middle (climax) I felt: _____ and _____

At the end of the story I felt: _____ and _____

Part 3 - Work with a partner to develop your story

Think again about the story you want to tell. Imagine it happening again, and pay close attention to the details. Your partner will ask you questions about your story. Give as MANY details as possible when you answer each question. At this time, you are NOT telling the story; you are only sharing details.

When did it happen? (How long ago? How old were you? Time of day? Time of year? etc...)	
Where did it happen? (City, place, inside/outside, home, school, work, etc....)	
Who was there? Who were you with when it happened? Names, etc...	
What happened? What are 2 or 3 important developments that took place?	

What happened first? Next? Last? (Do not tell the whole story –just some important event details.)	
What senses were used? (What did you see, hear, taste, touch, feel, smell...) What did it smell like? Taste like? Etc...	
What feelings did you have during and after the event? Fear? Sadness? Happiness? Did your feelings change during the story? How?	

3. Conclusion

Clearly, these activities could lead into further creative writing, presentation opportunities, and much more. You could even have the students create a class magazine with all of their stories. This kind of sensory-based activity activates not only more of the individual student brain, but also activates more of the connections between people that can make a learning community come alive.