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If you relish being cast as the heartless fiend who ruins love-affairs, takes all the fun out of Saturday's football game, and generally destroys weekends, walk into any freshman English class on a Friday and assign a 500-word essay due Monday to be written on any topic the student chooses. Cries of "I don't know what to write!" and "I have nothing to write!" and "I have nothing to say!" will assail you from all sides, or if your class is a particularly polite one, you will hear a low, general, agonized moan.

In teaching any introductory writing course, a common problem the instructor encounters is the students' feeling that they have nothing to write about because they have nothing to say. One solution to this problem is to use poetry and short stories as a stimulus for the teaching of expository writing. In teaching freshman English and remedial composition, I have found this procedure to be both useful and productive.

In class, the work of literature is taught as a work of literature would normally be taught. It is extremely important to allow discussion of the work by the students although the discussion should be directed by the teacher. The teacher should end the discussion by "laying the work to rest" with some conclusions about it, tempered with the admonition that a literary work can be perceived and studied in many different ways; consequently, the class discussion should not be seen by students as the last word on the work. The students are thus allowed some latitude in their approach to the writing assignment which arises from the discussion of the literary work.

The next step in the teaching process after the discussion is to make a bridge to the related topic; this is very difficult and should be carefully handled. Themes and ideas must be abstracted from the work by the instructor and related to the students' experience and ideas. The trick here is to choose a work which lends itself to this procedure. The poem "Fern Hill" by Dylan Thomas works well as a stimulus for expository papers. In spite of the poem's complex and unusual syntactic structures, with guidance from an instructor the average student is well able not only to understand the poem but to respond to it in the form of an essay. When using this poem as a catalyst for an essay, I have the students first identify the recurrent images: the colors gold, green, and white; and the sun and moon. Then I have them consider what their own associations with those things are and discuss what the poet seems to be expressing by using those images as he does. I ask the students who is speaking in the poem; how old the speaker is; where he is; what is going on in the poem, etc. With guidance, the students identify the main theme of the poem: the sense of absolute freedom one experiences in childhood because one is not aware of the passing of time, the realities of life, and the eventuality of death. To a child, the world is an enchanted kingdom where he is lord of all. When the students perceive this aspect of the poem, I make the bridge to the topic they are to write on. In the context of this teaching method, the poem may be seen as setting up a contrast between the poet's view of the world as a child and his view of it as an adult. The students are asked to consider

the similarities and differences between their views of life at those two times. They are asked to think about their perceptions of time, their perceptions of size, and their relationships with people at the two stages of life. The following assignment was given in my classes in conjunction with the teaching of "Fern Hill":

In this poem, Dylan Thomas is writing about the innocence and freedom of childhood. While a child, one is unaware of the passing of time, the existence of death, and the realities and responsibilities of life. Write an argument paper in which you discuss whether you feel you were happier and better off as a child or are happier and more satisfied dealing with life as an adult aware of realities. Back up your argument with concrete examples from your own experience or reading. DO NOT refer back to the poem excessively.

A comparison/contrast paper can also be generated from "Fern Hill":

(With the same introduction as above)
Write a Comparison/Contrast paper in which you compare your life as a child with your life as a young adult. Which is a happier time? A more fulfilling time? A more demanding time? Why? Would you rather be a child or an adult? Why?

The short story "For Esmé with Love and Squalor" by J.D. Salinger can be used as a basis for teaching the descriptive essay. A thorough analysis and discussion of the character of Esmé functions as a catalyst for the assignment. In a class discussion, the students were asked to find all passages in which they were given details about Esmé's physical appearance. A list of these physical details was put on the board. The students were then asked to identify and list Esmé's personality traits. They had to indicate the passage in the story from which they gained the insight into her character. Finally, the students were asked if they would know Esmé if they met her. Generally, they agreed that they would. At that point, I went back through the list of physical traits and personality traits and re-emphasized the author's use of concrete language and details in depicting Esmé as a character. The students were then asked to write a descriptive essay about a person they knew well. They were to use concrete language and details in the same effective way Salinger used them.

After teaching the poems: "The Darkling Thrush", "God's Grandeur", and "Dover Beach", I gave the following assignment:

It has been said that modern man has no absolute values left to believe in and consequently finds little hope in life. From your own experiences and reading,

do you find this to be true or not? Consider the ideas discussed in class while working with the poems: "The Darkling Thrush", "God's Grandeur", and "Dover Beach". Write an essay in which you consider the problems of belief, hope, meaning, and values in modern life with reference to the ideas in the works mentioned. Your thesis should come from considering the following questions: Does modern man have anything left to believe in? Is there hope in life? Does life have meaning for you--if so, why?

When the literary work is taught, the expository writing form to be used in doing the writing assignment is taught at the same time. For instance, when the short story "For Esmé with Love and Squalor" was discussed, a lecture on the writing of the descriptive essay was given.

Of course, there is always the student paper that reads thus: I liked the man with the little black dog. He was always sad and he had a very hard life but he was a nice man. His wife died and then he lost his house. But it was really terrible when the little black dog died etc., etc. Plot summary. How does the teacher prevent the student from responding to an assignment based on a work of literature by writing a plot summary? One way to do this is to have the class actually write a plot summary of the work before writing a paper on the related topic. This is a good way for the teacher to check up on the students' understanding of the work and an excellent exercise to aid students in achieving precision in writing. Then, when the paper on the related topic is written, there should be no or very little direct reference to the literary work itself.

In the discussion of the literary work, close reading should be stressed. The student should be told that if, in the course of writing the paper, he makes an assertion which is related to the concepts and themes in the literary work, he should be able to indicate where the idea is expressed in the text of the work. The student must understand that he is writing about the ideas in the literary work, not the work itself.

The advantage of using a literary work--rather than a scholarly or non-fiction essay--as a stimulus for expository writing is this: in reading a poem or short story the student becomes immersed in the rarefied, stimulating world of the work of literature without getting unduly concerned about the difficulties of the craft of writing. His imagination is freed. Students are not unimaginative but are very often out of touch with their feelings and perceptions. The teacher who can make the special world of a literary work alive to students and then make a good, solid bridge to a related topic which will make the student alive to his own perceptions, feelings, and imagination will hear very few cries of "I don't have anything to say!"