

Motoko's Creative Writing Workshop

Personal Stories of Change and Growth

Rationale

The idea for this unit came to me as I was helping my son with his personal essay for college application. As young adults mature, they constantly learn from their families, peers, educational institutions and community that shape their values and opinions. This unit teaches students through writing to reflect on their experiences in a positive light. It also encourages them as writers not to be limited by the actual facts, but to use their creative imagination in order to explore who they are and who they can be. This unit is designed for grades 7 and up.

Objectives:

Students will write a story that

- talks about their personal growth, reflecting who they are and what they believe in
- is based on their life experiences, with some room for creative imagination
- includes a 'focused snapshot' of their lives: a moment or anecdote that has shaped them
- has a beginning, middle and end, with dialogues, descriptions, details, emotions, and humor

Procedure

Preparation Activities (See the attached handouts)

Did you ever tell a lie?

Memory Map

(1) Students name 4-5 institutions that have framed their experiences. Example: family, school, after-school program, sport team, summer camp, church, part-time job, etc.

(2) Explain SPARK, an acronym for **skills, perception, attitude, relationship, and knowledge**. Students list three experiences that changed their SPARK. Example:

- When I was little, I always had to wear my sister's hand-me-downs, and I was jealous of her. Then one day I discovered that she was jealous of me.
- I thought I hated math. Then my fourth grade teacher taught me fun math games, and I realized that I was very good with numbers.
- When I was in sixth grade, I visited a planetarium and learned about the space. I realized that all human troubles were small compared to the vastness of the universe.

(3) Students choose one experience or event that will become the core of their story, and summarize it in a paragraph. Encourage them to look at their options objectively from a reader's point of view. Which event promises to be the best story, with lessons accessible and valuable to readers?

(4) Students, as the main character of their story, determine their state of mind at the beginning of the story.

Example: There are three possible patterns

At the beginning	At the end
Unhappy, jealous, insecure, miserable	Happy, secure, confident, proud
Happy, innocent, trusting, naive	Loss of innocence. Wisdom gained
Bored, ignorant, selfish, arrogant	Goals defined. Knowledge gained. Caring, humble

(5) Students name 1-3 characters that affect or witness the event. More than 4 characters in a story confuse readers.

Example: my sister and my mother

(6) Students determine when and where their story starts.

Example: three days before my eighth birthday, in the living room of my house

(7) Students fill in the planning sheet.

(8) Students write out the whole story. They may choose to write in the first person, or in the third person using fictional names for the characters.

Notes for Teachers

- Explain to students that in writing this story they are not bound by facts. The original event that triggers the change in them should come from their own experiences, but they should feel free to dramatize it, using their creativity and imagination. Their goal is to create a satisfying story. Encourage them to imagine themselves as a movie director shooting a short film. They may embellish certain moments in the story in order to emphasize them, while condensing or omitting others. They may come up with an ending different from what actually happened. (You may tell them that the story should be 80% facts and 20% imagined, etc. They need not reveal what part of the story is not real.) Their goal is to transcend the facts to get to the ‘truth’. In other words, the lessons of the story must be illuminated and clarified by the author’s choices.
- If a story contains facts that are embarrassing or hurtful to someone, the writer must use fictional names and change the details about the characters to protect everyone’s privacy.
- Writing in the third person adds an extra layer of objectivity. This may be useful when a student is writing about a traumatic issue, such as death, divorce, and abuse.

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Tasks

1. Name institutions that have framed your experiences.

Families

2. Think of 3 experiences you had that changed your

S _____

P _____

A _____

R _____

K _____

3. Choose an event or experience that will become the core of your story.

4. You are the main character of your story. What is your state of mind at the beginning of your story?

5. Who are the relevant characters that affect or witness the change in you?

6. When and where does the story start?

7. Fill in the planning chart

Set-up	Introduce MC (yourself) and 2-3 important characters. What is your situation?	
Build-up	Describe the day of the event. Build it up with a sense of suspense.	
The core event	Describe fully with meaningful details and dialogues. Use 5 senses. (Is there humor in your story? What makes a story funny?)	
Insights	What lessons did you learn? What new understanding did you gain?	
Reflection	How did the change in you affect your life afterwards?	

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Example Story

As I was growing up in Japan, my least favorite word in the entire Japanese language was *osagari*. *Osagari* means hand-me-downs. I always had to wear *osagari*, because my sister Naoko was three years older than I. She would get new clothes every year, and every year I got a set of old, worn, stained clothes from her. I knew that my parents weren't rich, and it would cost too much to buy both of us something new every year, but I still hated it. To make matters worse, my sister was tall and skinny, but I was a little shorter and chubbier. Sometimes her sweater was a little too tight for me, her skirt a bit too long. My mother would hem the skirt for me, but she wouldn't buy me a new sweater. I had to squeeze myself into the hand-me-down sweater. It was so unfair.

A few days before my eighth birthday, though, something special happened. My mother handed me a thin box from a department store. I opened it and found a brand new scarf! It was pink, my favorite color!

"This is for your birthday. You can wear it for your birthday party," my mom smiled.
"Thank you, mom! I love it!"

I put the scarf around my neck and pranced around the house. Finally, a piece of clothing that was my own! I ran to the entrance hall of the house, where my sister was getting ready to go out. She usually didn't play with me much. She preferred to go out on a bike with her friends. All her friends had bikes, too, but I didn't. I didn't know how to ride one yet. I supposed that when my sister outgrew her bike, it would be mine and I could practice then.

"Look! Mom gave me a new scarf!" I shouted gleefully. My sister looked at it, and said, "It's an ugly scarf."

"No, it's not!" I was hurt.

"Yes, it is. It's pink. Such a baby color," she said as she got on the bike.

"It's not!" I felt so mad my blood boiled up to my face. I ran out the door and pushed her. She lost her balance and almost fell. She caught herself, but scraped her ankle on the pedal of the bike.

"Ow! Look what you did!" she yelled. She reached over, yanked the scarf off my neck, and threw it on the ground. Then she ran over it with the bike, and was gone.

Now my new scarf was ruined! It was all muddy where the bike tires ran over it! I began to cry. My mother came out and exclaimed, "What happened?" As I explained the whole story between the sobs, my mother looked thoughtful. She simply said, "We'll talk with Naoko when she gets back."

She offered to wash my scarf, but I didn't want it anymore. The scarf lay forlornly on a chair in the living room. When Naoko came home, my mother calmly asked, "Why did you do this to your sister?"

Naoko said nothing. “You must apologize to your sister,” my mom insisted. Naoko’s eyes flashed. “Why? Because she’s got a brand-new scarf and I got nothing?” “That’s not fair!” I shouted, “It’s my birthday present! And I’m the one who always has to wear hand-me-downs!” “Oh, shut up! Everyone thinks you are so cute and smart, even though you act in such a babyish way!”

I was amazed. My sister was actually jealous of me? “Bububut,” I stammered, “you are the one who’s tall and pretty.” “No! Everyone thinks I’m skinny and dumb!” she began to cry hysterically.

My mother, who hadn’t said a word for a while, suddenly reached over and pulled us both to her sides. She gently hugged us and whispered, “You both are my daughters. You both are important to me.”

It was not so much the words she said but the way her lips quivered that stunned us. Our mom looked about ready to cry. That stopped our bickering and crying at once. We pulled away, a little embarrassed and confused. I had never seen my mom like this. I felt bad.

Naoko quietly walked over to the TV and turned it on. My mom went into the kitchen. Naoko and I started to watch a cartoon show. She glanced over to my scarf on the chair and said, “Sorry.” “Me, too,” I said, without taking my eyes off the TV screen.

A few days later, on the morning of my birthday, my mom handed each of us a thin, white box. Inside we each found a scarf, but they were even better than what I got before. They were hand-made! I didn’t know that my mom could knit so well. Mine was pink with white stripes, and Naoko’s was red with purple stripes. They both had long fringes, and each had our initials on it, “N” for Naoko and “M” for me!

“Thanks, mom!”

We decided to wear them to school that day. When I wrapped mine around my neck, it felt soft and fuzzy as a cloud. I breathed in its warmth, and it smelled like my mom. Naoko looked great with her scarf. As she and I ran to our school, she looked at me and said, “Happy Birthday.”

I kept that scarf for a long time. Many years later, when I finally outgrew baby pink, I got as a hand-me-down my sister’s red and purple one. Even though her scarf was kind of old and shabby by then, and had her initial on it, I didn’t mind. I didn’t mind at all.