

Conversational Writing

AN INTERACTIVE APPROACH



**Photocopiable Situational and
Character Sketches with Writing
Prompts**

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Letter to Teachers

Rationale

Liberation! Communication! Fun!

This is a book about student choice and freedom of expression. It's a book that offers possibilities for students to discover and develop their unique voices and nuanced views, using an approach that can make writing lively, surprising, and social.

Because academic writing often has fairly rigid structural requirements, many students come to view writing as a form of drudgery, a difficult task that isn't so much an engaging means of communication as it is a mandatory means to get a grade or pass an assessment test. When this perception of writing cements, it discourages creativity and joy. Students may get the idea that in the classroom they are always writing for a red-pen audience of one.

The goal of *Conversational Writing* then, is to give students a creative and engaging outlet to practice their writing as a form of conversation with their peers. Students work both independently and interdependently, as they **play with language**, **experiment with tone**, and **inhabit different points of view**.

How To Use This Book

The thematic units in this book contain brief situational or character sketches followed by a series of prompts for students to respond to. Each sketch can be used as a stand-alone writing activity. It can also be used as a warm-up activity, a prewriting strategy to generate language and ideas, *en route* to a more formalized academic writing task. Some follow-up tasks are listed at the end of this letter.

Suggested Steps:

1. Read the sketches you are working with to your class out loud, clarifying the theme and meaning of each sketch, as well as any new phrases or vocabulary. To start, it's good to use sheets from the same unit for one writing session. As students gain familiarity and confidence with the activity, you can change it up by using sheets from different units within each group (see Tips below).
2. Put students in groups of 4-6 and give each student in each group one of the sketches. Group sizes may vary, depending on your class size and on the number of prompts the sketches have.

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Have the students read their sketch, and then choose any one prompt to respond to for their first writing task.

3. When they've finished responding to one prompt, they exchange their sketch with another group member. Then they read the new sketch they've received, as well as their group member's response to one of the prompts, and then choose another prompt to respond to.
4. They repeat this process of responding to a new prompt and then exchanging sketches with other group members until all of the prompts have been completed on each sheet.
5. Once the sheets are all filled up, group members can take turns reading the sheets in their groups, starting with the sketch itself, and then their group members' responses to the prompts. Each group member can act as the discussion leader for one of the sheets and try to guess who wrote what, or ask questions about the responses. Read a couple of the group's sheets to the whole class and lead a follow-up commentary on the writing and activity. Having the instructor read students' work can add humor, meaning, and gravitas to the proceedings.

Tips

- * Discuss the concept of freewriting beforehand. In freewriting, the goal is to get words and thoughts down on the page, usually within a set time limit, without being overly concerned with perfect grammar and mechanics.
- * Encourage creativity and flow. Let your students know that they are free to respond to the prompts in any way that they want, so long as it adds something to the conversation. They can build upon their group members' responses, or take their writing in a completely different direction. Details are key! Encourage them to think of reasons, examples, anecdotes for every entry! Write outside the boxes!
- * A suggested time limit is 4-5 minutes for the first round, with an additional minute added to each round, as the students will need time to read the new sketch they receive and their classmates' responses to it.
- * With the freewriting ethos in mind, setting time limits for how long the students have to respond to prompts can lend structure and pace to the activity. It can also help students develop the skill of assessing and responding to written material efficiently, while still being free of the formal restrictions and structural imperatives of collegiate essays and written assessment tests.
- * Demonstrate the task of double-entry journal writing, in which students choose a quote from a particular piece of writing and respond to it any way they choose e.g. describing their thoughts and feelings about it, whether they like/dislike it, agree/disagree with it, what the quote brings to mind or what questions it raises, and so on. When students have been

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practicing double-entry journal writing, they will become adept at responding to a completed sheet in a double-entry follow-up task.

- * The sketches can also be used with an individual student working his/her way through all of the prompts on one page, and fleshing out the character or situation to their liking.
- * As with all new classroom tasks and activities, it's important to make sure all of the students understand the directions beforehand. Use clarification questions regarding the task directions before starting, and probing questions to follow-up on their written responses.
- * Using sketches from different units within one group can add variety and surprise to the activity. For example, for a group of four students, you could include one sketch from each of the following units: Strange Jobs, Surprising Situations, Headline News, and TOEFL Style.

A Note on the Sketches and Prompts

The sketches and prompts are intended to help facilitate the conversation and give students ways of responding, but they are by no means immovable: Students can create variations on the prompts as they wish, and write 'outside the box' and on the back of the page if they need more creative space or simply choose to do so. Moreover, as the very approach of this book is about creative freedom and collaboration, there is a blank sketch template at the end in which you and your students can create your own unique situations and characters to work with.

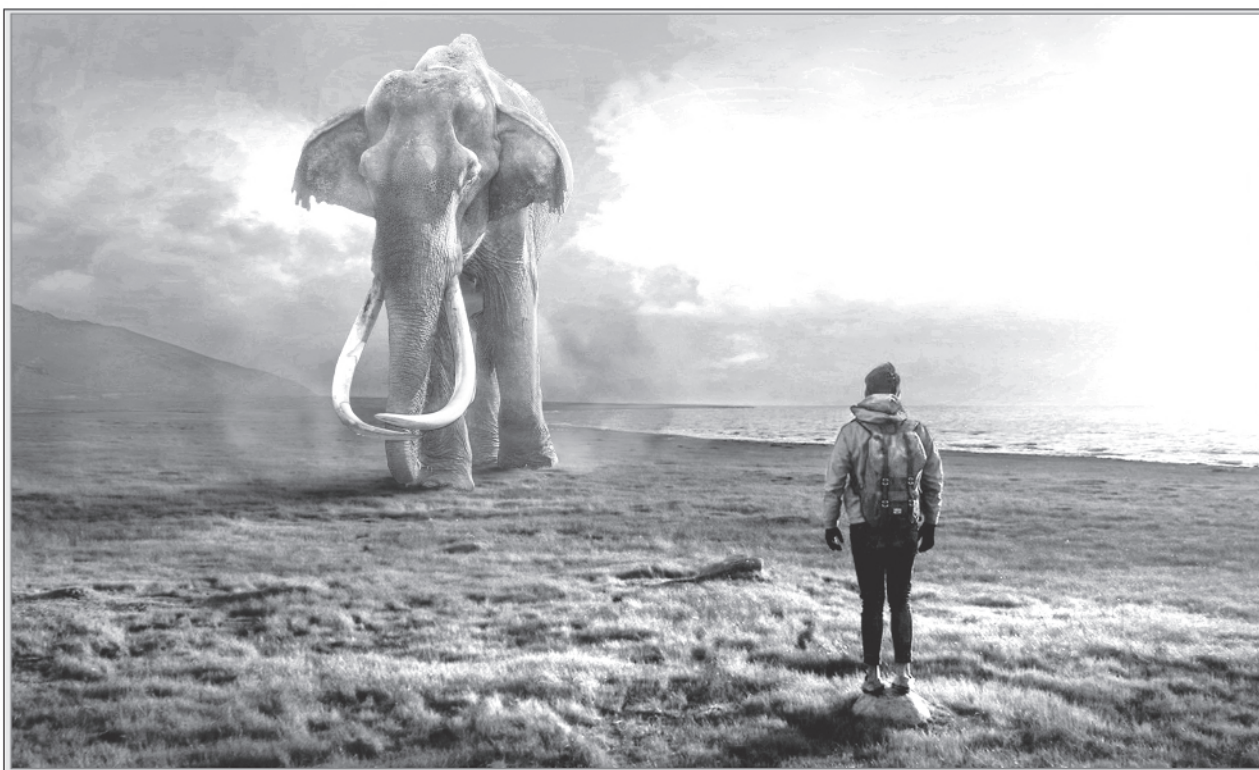
Follow-up Activities

The sketch sheets can be used for an array of follow-up activities, including descriptive and comparative essays on people, places, and things; argumentative essays on TOEFL topics; personal narrative essays on jobs, dreams, goals, and role models; and collaborative written interviews, dialogues, and role plays.

You can also have your students write a fictional story based on one of the sketches. Challenge them to try to include each of their group members' responses into their story, or have them write freely using the responses as more of a jumping off point or backstory. They can also work on a sheet individually to create their own story, filling in all of the prompts, and then writing up their story in a short narrative.

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The sketches in this unit have 4 writing prompts each. It all starts here - it's time to write into the great beyond!

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Sketch 1 - Shipwreck

Kamika Kasongo felt a surge of exuberance matched by the powerful ocean swells beneath the ship that now carried her and her four college besties through the seas of the Caribbean. By making this adventure happen she had turned her late night pipe dream into a glittering reality. In the soft sea breeze she sipped her impossibly fresh pineapple juice, and then trouble hit.

Kamika's journal entry describes how she ended up shipwrecked on a desert island...

Something that's making her increasingly uncomfortable on the island...

The highlight of her experience so far...

Something she promises herself she's going to do if she survives this catastrophe...

UNIT 1: SURPRISING SITUATIONS

Sketch 2 - Rock Concert

When Ralph Filbert won two concert tickets and backstage passes to see his favorite rock band, Leather Messiah, he went absolutely berserk, launching himself out from behind his desk, shimmying around the office, howling with glee, playing air guitar over his head and behind his back as he strutted back and forth through the walkway of his colleagues' cubicles.

Ralph's typical day at the office and beyond includes...

Some comments made by Ralph's colleagues as they observed his manic display in the office...

Ralph's description of the scene backstage at the concert...

Ralph's interaction with the lead singer of the band Leather Messiah...

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Sketch 3 - Going Viral

Thirteen-year-old Billy Rad's YouTube video has just reached one million views. He's ecstatic about this. The only problem is that his parents have forbidden him from uploading more videos on YouTube. He's wondering how or if he should broach the issue with them, or if they'll understand this time, given the phenomenal 'success' of his new video.

A brief description of Billy's video that reached one million views...

One of the biggest challenges of making the video...

Some of the strange and notable comments from the video's comment section...

How this video will change Billy's life...

UNIT 1: SURPRISING SITUATIONS

Sketch 4 - Road Trip

Aabha Basu is driving across the country, cruising the freeways and back roads with her favorite music blasting, determined to have some new experiences, and change her life.

What prompted Aabha to take this road trip now?

Describe some of the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes she's experiencing on her trip.

The hitchhiker Aabha picked up at dusk next to a wheat field tells her a strange tale...

Once Aabha arrives at her destination...

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Sketch 5 - Apocalypse

Pia Diaz has just woken up from a seven-month coma to find herself in an eerie, abandoned hospital. Slowly, she tries out her motor skills, rising from her bed and finding a glass of water. Then, she gets dressed and makes her way out of the hospital.

What can Pia remember from before her coma?

Describe the scene Pia observes outside the hospital.

Some of Pia's thoughts on what might have caused this catastrophe...

Suddenly, Pia hears a strange sound in the distance and when she looks up she sees...

UNIT 1: SURPRISING SITUATIONS

Sketch 6 - Intergalactic

As one of the first space tourists in history, Su-me Soh, is ready for the adventure of a lifetime. In preparation for her trip through the cosmos, she has taken all of the training courses and passed all of the tests; she's bonded with her fellow voyagers, paid the astronomical fees, and brushed up on all of her favorite sci-fi films and novels. She's as excited and as ready as she'll ever be. What could possibly go wrong?

What kind of training did Su-me undergo for this mission?

Describe some of Su-me's fellow voyagers on the rocket.

What's the first sign of trouble on Su-me's voyage?

How might Su-me's voyage end?

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Sketch 7 - Costume Contest

It's the annual Halloween Costume Contest in your city and, lucky you, you have been appointed as one of the judges.

Describe some of your favorite costumes here.

What's the most difficult thing about being a judge in this contest?

Describe some of the weirder and/or worst costumes here.

Describe another competition you could be a judge for.

UNIT 1: SURPRISING SITUATIONS

Sketch 8 - Classroom Daydreamer

So you've zoned out in class again, staring out the window for a while, drifting far away from this dreary lesson. Your eyelids grow heavy and you begin to nod off. A pleasant dreaminess overtakes you, and then you're gone, off into one of the deepest sleeps you've had in weeks. When you hear your teacher barking your name, you awake to find everyone in the class staring at you. A thread of drool is hanging from your gaping mouth.

What were you dreaming about?

What went through your head when you awoke to find thirty classmates staring at you?

Describe some of the things making you so tired lately.

What do you find most enjoyable and/or most exhausting in class?