



Writing Matters: Creative Writing Activities Using the *Canadian Writers* Website

All comprehensive teaching strategies on the Library and Archives Canada site contain detailed guidelines for educators, including learning outcomes/expectations/objectives, instructions for classroom use, student worksheets and suggested criteria for assessment.

TEACHING STRATEGY

Description of Project

This unit will encourage students to use the material on the Library and Archives Canada *Canadian Writers* website to inspire their own creative writing. The unit contains student-centered activities that emphasize the guided process of a dialectic triad: information, inspiration, and invention. Students will access information from the archival fonds of celebrated Canadian writers and, with modest teacher intervention and guidance, will synthesize their discoveries into their own creative writing.

Student-centered Activities

Activities 1 through 3 should be presented consecutively over several class periods. Teachers may choose to assign individual tasks or divide the class into small groups. For example, activity 1 could be assigned as small group work. There are also two optional activities suggested if time permits.

EXPECTATIONS

Teachers and teacher-librarians are encouraged to access this site to fulfill a variety of curricular expectations for their students in grades 11 and 12. As stated in many provincial guidelines, students are expected to use print and electronic sources for analytic and creative purposes. Furthermore, students are expected to “demonstrate an understanding of Canadian fiction [...] and non-fiction from diverse cultures, regions, and time periods.” (See *The Ontario Curriculum 2000*, p. 69.) “The student will show an understanding of the types of discourse: by responding to and employing the media (aural, visual, print and multi-media) related to a specific context.” (See *The Quebec Secondary School Curriculum Document* p. 16). Since the Canadian writers featured on the Library and Archives Canada site represent various genres of literature and regions of Canada, their generous contributions may help students realize these expectations.

LEARNING OUTCOMES/EXPECTATIONS/OBJECTIVES

Subject/Age

Language Arts (English), grades 11 and 12

Language Arts Outcomes

(R) Reading

- Recognize the characteristics of primary and secondary sources
- Demonstrate an understanding of the uses of archival material such as journals, drafts, and other primary sources
- Understand the stages of creative writing from inspiration and revision to invention

(W) Writing

- Assess the value of revision in all forms of writing
- Experiment with the various linguistic forms and genres modeled by the *Canadian Writers* website
- Explore in essay form some of the literary terms defined or expressed in this study
- Write with an authentic voice and a clear sense of audience

(O) Oral and Visual Communication

- Respect, support and collaborate with others in all shared explorations
- Invent a variety of rehearsal or collaborative strategies for an exchange of ideas
- Employ visual and aural technologies displayed by the various writers on the *Canadian Writers* website (including multimedia approaches) to convey ideas

REFERENCES

From Ink Lake: Canadian Stories. Selected by Michael Ondaatje. [Mississauga, Ontario: Knopf Canada, 1992.

Ghiselin, Brewster, ed. *The Creative Process: a Symposium*. Toronto: New American Library of Canada, 1965.

The Oxford Book of French-Canadian Short Stories. Introduced by Marie-Claire Blais. Edited by Richard Teleky. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Urquhart, Jane. *The Whirlpool: a Novel*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.

Introductory Activity

This teacher-directed activity may be used to introduce students to the *Canadian Writers* website. Teachers can use all or part of the following tasks as an initiation strategy.

Tasks

1. Open the Library and Archives Canada website. <http://www.collectionscanada.ca>. Have students explore the home page by clicking on the various menu choices such as the ArchiviaNet, AMICUS, and site search boxes, the featured sites and products section, the right-hand menu bar and left-hand menu. Then ask them to select the “Browse Selected Topics” button, click on “Literature”; and under “Virtual Exhibitions”, click on *Canadian Writers*.
2. Present an overview of the *Canadian Writers* website. Many Canadian writers have generously deposited their papers with Library and Archives Canada including Marie-Claire Blais, Jacques Brault, Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, Roger Lemelin, Carol Shields, Elizabeth Smart, Michel Tremblay and Jane Urquhart. The following activities are intended as an introduction to the creative process using selected online resources from manuscripts of well-known Canadian writers. The exploration of these resources should both connect students with the writers’ best work and inspire them to create their own best work.
3. Have students click on “About This Site”, and ask them to answer the following questions:
 - a) What information seems relevant to you?
 - b) How does digitization of Canadiana serve both the artist and the public?
 - c) What is the meaning of the word “fonds” in this context? What does a fonds include?
 - d) Notice the contributors to this project so far. Does this list seem inclusive and varied?
4. Have students click on “Introduction”. Instruct them to peruse the list of available writers available and click on any writer they wish to explore. Have them answer the following questions:
 - a) What are the three categories provided for the exploration of each writer?
 - b) What seems to be contained within the three categories?
 - c) Do any of the items spark your curiosity? Which ones?
 - d) Have you read any of the stories or novels mentioned?
 - e) Are you equally proficient in reading French and English? Which do you prefer?
 - f) Why are some of the titles changed when translated into the other official language?

g) Before exploring each writer on Library and Archives Canada's *Canadian Writers* site in depth, you may wish to read a work by one of the featured writers. Find a work and read it.

5. Have students go to the Urquhart "Manuscript Gallery" and select *The Whirlpool*. Ask them to click on the cover of the black notebook entitled "Descriptions of Bodies Found in the Niagara River and Whirlpool...". Select one of the entries and read it aloud to the students. Point out that this notebook was kept by Jane Urquhart's husband's grandmother, who ran a funeral undertaking business in the Niagara Falls area. These unusual notebooks inspired Urquhart to write her popular novel *The Whirlpool*.

Activity 1 Information

Without readers, archival documents such as literary manuscripts remain unread and forgotten. Readers bring these documents to life by connecting them to their personal interests. The creative process is an organic development that requires imaginative connections with “neural and electrical messages rippling the whole into dynamic patterns.” (R.W. Gerard, “The Biological Basis of Imagination,” in *The Creative Process: a Symposium*, 1965, p. 246)

Students will be guided in this site search by activities based on three basic principles of creativity: information, inspiration and invention.

Information

Much brain work precedes the imaginative flash -- the theory of gravitation may result only when the metaphorical apple falls on the prepared mind.

- R.W. Gerard, in *The Creative Process: a Symposium*, 1965, p. 246

Preparation, as you will see by exploring the *Canadian Writers* website, is vital to any form of creation. Thomas Edison, the prolific American inventor, insisted that a high percentage of perspiration is a precondition of inspiration. But playful exploration is just as important in the creative process. So in response to the questions and probes of this search, let your students’ curiosity lead them as they explore the resources of Library and Archives Canada. Have them record their responses in a writing journal, blog or log.

Process

1. Ask students to review the list of writers and select one for further study. Have them read more about their chosen writer on the *Canadian Writers* website. Then ask them to answer the following questions:
 - a. Has the author used different genres in his/her writing? Which genre does s/he seem to focus on, and why?)
 - b. Was the writer influenced by other writers and thinkers? What other influences are mentioned? How was this evident in the author’s creative writing?
 - c. What type of writer was he/she? (*example: novelist, playwright, essayist, political writer, biographer, poet, etc.*) What was his or her greatest achievement or claim to fame?

- d. Identify the main themes or issues explored by this author. What problems were examined or exposed?
- e. Did this writer tackle controversial subjects? Was he or she subject to censorship or book banning?
- f. Record at least two interesting facts that you learned about the writer. Why did these facts spark your interest?

Activity 2 Inspiration

Without readers, archival documents such as literary manuscripts remain dormant and forgotten. Readers bring these documents to life by connecting them to their personal interests. The creative process is an organic development that requires imaginative connections with “neural and electrical messages rippling the whole into dynamic patterns.” (R.W. Gerard, “The Biological Basis of Imagination,” in *The Creative Process: a Symposium*, 1965, p. 246)

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Inspiration

I do not believe that inspiration falls from heaven. I think it rather the result of a profound indolence and of our incapacity to put to work certain forces in ourselves. These unknown forces work deep within us, with the aid of the elements of daily life, its scenes and passions....

- Jean Cocteau, “The Process of Inspiration,” *The Creative Process: a Symposium*, 1965 p. 81-82

Jean Cocteau suggests that inspiration forces itself upon us, even against our will. The creative work “makes itself in us and in spite of us demands to be born.” (p. 82) Before the conscious act of writing takes place, we need to slumber in our “indolence”.

Inspiration is the stage before the conscious act: “To write, to conquer ink and paper, accumulate letters and paragraphs, divide them with periods and commas, is a different matter from carrying around the dream of a play or of a book.” (Jean Cocteau, in *The Creative Process*, p. 82)

Process

1. Ask students to click on the Manuscript Gallery of any writer. After they have viewed several items from the gallery, have students jot down in their writing journal, blog or log any ideas that come to mind. Instruct them to use their imagination to freely associate those ideas to their own daily lives. They should indulge their dreams and resist reality.
2. Have students repeat this process for another writer of their choice. Since inspiration is often mutually induced (the discoveries of insulin and DNA were collaborative ventures), instruct students to share the Manuscript Gallery with a partner. Have them exchange ideas they are able to glean from the gallery. They should use a rehearsal strategy such as brainstorming or exploratory talk with their partner. Individually,

students will choose a way to give shape to some of the ideas that they have gleaned by working with their partner. Provide suggestions to students as to the various forms they could use to express their ideas. For example, one student may wish to write a short story while another would prefer to create a poem.

3. Ask students to answer the following questions:
 - a. Which of the writers' manuscripts most resembles your works in progress? Explain.
 - b. What similarities exist between your writing process and any of the writers featured on the *Canadian Writers* site?
 - c. If you had to research the work of one of these writers, which would you be inspired to choose? Explain.

Activity 2

Optional Exercise - A Writers Inspiration

The following passages are taken from works written by the writers introduced on the *Canadian Writers* website. By reading the following passages carefully for clues, students should be able to detect a source for the author's writing within the manuscript galleries. Ideas, like dreams, have many disguises, and they may not wish to reveal themselves. Besides content, students should look for clues of style and tone. Above all, students will learn to appreciate the writers' insights into the human condition.

1. All hope of redistributing this incredible classification process lost, Maud sat on a low stool in the twilight of the closet and considered the possessions of drowned men; how they always carried similar objects in the pockets. Yet, it was the crack in the cuff-link that would allow some relative to identify a body the earth had already, mercifully, taken care of. But rarely did that relative appear. These wild, violent deaths were too grotesque, Maud imagined, to be faced. (Jane Urquhart, *The Whirlpool*, p. 192)
2. Édouard entra dans la chambre de la grosse femme sur le bout des pieds. Elle était assoupie ou, ploutôt, elle faisait semblant de l'être, ne voulant pas que Richard et Philippe viennent la voir avant que sa toilette ne soit terminée. Édouard prit doucement le plateau où traînaient les reliefs du repas de sa belle-sœur. « Dormez-vous? » Elle tourna vers lui une tête souriante où se lisait un certain soulagement. « Ah, c'est toé. » Reprenant son accent français, Édouard murmura sur un ton de conspirateur : « Vous croyiez que c'était la terrible Alllbertine? » [sic] (Michel Tremblay, *La grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte*, p. 48)
3. And so, returning to Canada through the fall sunshine, I look homeward now and melt, for though I am crowned and anointed with love and have obtained from life all I asked, what am I as I enter my parents' house but another prodigal daughter? I see their faces at which I shall never be free to look dispassionately. They gaze out of the window with eyes harassed by what they continually fear they see, like premature ghosts, straggling homeward over the plain. (Elizabeth Smart, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, in *From Ink Lake*, p. 458)
4. Héloïse avait fermé les yeux. Elle priait, un peu à l'écart, loin de ses frères et des jeunes enfants. Les Ave mélancoliques coulaient de ses lèvres comme des plaintes. Seules y répondaient quelques jeunes filles toujours vaillantes -- celles que Jean Le Maigre appelait les Grandes A : Aurélia, Anita, Anna... Les voix d'hommes s'étaient tues, et Grand-Mère n'ouvrait plus la bouche que pour dire des « A...men, A...men » au milieu des bébés accroupis. (Marie-Claire Blais, *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, p. 29)

Activity 3 Invention

To create consists precisely in not making useless combinations and in making those which are useful and which are only a small minority. Invention is discernment, choice.

- Henri Poincaré, "Mathematical Creation," in *The Creative Process: a Symposium*, 1965, p. 35

Your Creations

Having learned about the first two aspects of the creative process, information and inspiration, students will proceed to the third component, invention. They will use what they have discovered about the writers' information and inspiration to invent their own creative response to the work of an important Canadian writer.

Process

Have students choose one of the following options:

1. Reflect upon any of the situations described in the excerpts found in the optional exercise "A Writer's Inspiration". Write your own creative or analytic response to the excerpt.
2. Use the ideas you elaborated in Activity 2 and develop them into your own creative writing.
3. Write a journal entry about your time searching through the *Canadian Writers* website. In your writing, reflect upon the impressions, positive and negative, that the writers have made upon you.
4. Choose one of the following:
 - a. Open the Urquhart "Manuscript Gallery" and find the description of the "Body of Man found in Whirlpool Rapids on Sunday July 21/1918 by Reddy Hill." From the clues listed in this description, recreate this person as you imagine him to be before he jumped into the rapids. Invent a history for this person, or any other person described in this diary or notebook. Consider writing a murder mystery with the lead question: Was it suicide?
 - b. Open the Smart or Garneau "Manuscript Gallery" and examine the journals, poetry and artwork. Then write a poetic response to one of the items in this gallery. Begin keeping a journal of your own, especially in response to some of the pieces you discover on the *Canadian Writers* website.

- c. Open Lemelin “Manuscript Gallery” and examine the frontispiece drawing for an edition of *Au pied de la pente douce*. Create another ink drawing and title (in English, if you prefer) for this novel. Or find a script for one of Lemelin’s radio/TV plays and argue why it should be rebroadcast. (Also, view the video excerpts on the *Canadian Writers* site or see if you can find some tapes of the *Plouffe Family* in your local video store.)
- d. Open the Blais or Smart “Manuscript Gallery” and translate any page with artwork from one of the notebooks. Reflect on the relationship between Blais’ or Smart’s words and art, and consider how the art connects with the writing. (Notice that Blais uses both French and English in her notebooks.) Record some of Blais’ or Smart’s quotations, and keep a notebook of your own quotations in both English and French, or in any other language that you possess.

Optional Culminating Activity

Conclude this introductory study of the *Canadian Writers* site with a brief letter to all Canadian artists, dead or alive, either to thank them or to encourage them to donate their creative sources (“essences”) to Library and Archives Canada. If it is true that the work creates the artist, it is equally true that the artist creates new life in us.

Assessment Criteria

Program Area: Language, Reading

Criterion: Demonstrate an understanding of the process of creativity from primary sources to published works

Attainment Descriptors:

- The student detects changes to primary manuscripts, and assesses the value of those changes.
- The student reveals an understanding of common literary terms, such as *mood*, *tone*, *viewpoint*.
- The student analyzes artistic elements that influence a writer's content and style.
- The student recognizes the form of various genres, and explains their unique qualities.

Program Area: Language, Writing

Criterion: Select and use an appropriate analytic and/or creative form to reveal an understanding of this literary manuscript study

Attainment Descriptors:

- The student uses any artistic form with written accompaniment to demonstrate any concept expressed by one of the writers.
- The student analyzes a work by one of the writers to reveal an understanding of the relationship of her/his primary sources to the published work.
- The student writes a roman à clefs using ideas on autobiographical writing acquired in this study.
- The student explores one of the literary genres, including TV and radio plays, to explain its unique qualities.

Program Areas: Language, Oral Work, Editing, Sharing

Criteria: Share work, edit and revise

Attainment Descriptors:

- The student forms a group to share his or her work with classmates.
- The student explains a work-in-progress to his or her groupmates, sharing sources and suggestions.
- The student edits and proofreads own work-in-progress, correcting errors with the help of others (spellchecker, teacher, classmates, etc.).

Program Area: Language, Oral and Visual Communication

Criterion: Use listening and communication skills

Attainment Descriptors:

- The student demonstrates an ability to listen and to respond to the insights of others.
- The student builds on the ideas contributed by others on the subject of creativity.
- The student investigates the relevance of archival records to current situations.
- The student understands and shares orally the insights gleaned from this archival study.