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Short Story Unit
The Fifteen-Minute Short Story

THE FIFTEEN-MINUTE SHORT STORY

Abstract:

After sufficient classroom examinations of short stories, such that students understand the concept of writing for a specific audience as well as the importance of an engaging opening, the show-don't-tell mandate, and the short story's "leanness," this exercise assesses their understanding and offers them an opportunity to be creative within a limited framework. It can be used in grades 6-12.

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3a Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3b Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection and multiple plot lines to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3d Use precise words and phrases, telling details and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting and/or characters/

Procedure:

Students will write a short short story within a very limited period. (This exercise suggests 15 minutes, but the time frame is certainly adaptable.) This is an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the "bones" of story-writing, that is, the engaging opening, the show-don't-tell mandate, the efficient introduction and revelation of character, and the general "leanness" of short stories.

Their reading audience for this short story is to be the middle-schooler, grades 5-8. This, they should be reminded, is the age of huge crushes, continual bafflement about adults and their decision-making processes, a passionate belief in heroes and idealism, often a sense of being a misfit, the beginnings of intense peer-bonding, real anxiety about growing up to be a "worthy" teen-ager (that is, a cool one), a sense of self that is tentative, and much lingering childlike-ness.

Six sentences are provided to the students. Each student chooses a sentence which must appear verbatim as the first or last sentence of the story.

1. If [s]he is not back here in five minutes, then I'll know.

2. Like, right, I'm not old enough to know the difference.
3. Andy could not believe his/her eyes.
4. It's impossible, you know, to see color by moonlight.
5. What really is the difference between visiting all the relatives on Thanksgiving and going to hell?
6. Watching a clock's minute hand seems to make it go slower.

In this short time frame, students will be producing only a draft. They are not to worry about proofreading and revising. Depending on the teacher's objectives, the stories can be shared as is as an exercise in identifying and reviewing the abovementioned characteristics of the short story, or the stories can be revised, fleshed out and published.

Materials:

Laptops certainly facilitate writing, but this can be paper-and-pen as well. If the latter is your circumstance, I would extend the allotted time to something beyond 15 minutes.