Applied Practice

Master Classes

Writing Lessons from Great Authors

APPRENTICE LEVEL

APPLIED PRACTICE
Master Classes: Writing Lessons from Great Authors
Apprentice Level

Teacher Notes

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Suggested Responses and Additional Activities

*Suggested responses are included for the practices in these lessons

A NOTE FOR TEACHERS

We have created the *Master Classes* series based on the premise that teachers and students can find no better examples of excellence in writing than those provided by the literature they are studying. The "master examples" in each lesson are therefore drawn from the masterpieces commonly read on the relevant grade level. As a particular text may or not be on an individual class's reading list, we have provided a brief context for each quotation. This avoids confusion and allows students to concentrate on the quality of the writing.

To enable students to learn the most about the particular writing skill highlighted, each of the twelve lessons has the following format:

- A definition, which succinctly explains the meaning of the writing skill under discussion
- At least three "master examples" of the writing skill, with not only a context for each example but also an explanation of how it exemplifies that skill
- A short but illuminating discussion of the skill
- A practice that enables the student, in a stimulating way, to begin to incorporate the skill into his or her own prose style; where appropriate, the exercise is followed, at the back of the book, by suggested responses
- An essay, with a prompt question adaptable to an individual class's reading assignments, which further develops the student's use of the writing skill; where appropriate, the essay is preceded by a pre-writing exercise

At the back of the book, in addition to the "Suggested Responses," you will find "Further Activities," which build on the skills demonstrated in the lessons.

Each book in the *Master Classes* series has been written to complement the curriculum of an approximate grade-level. Likewise, the writing skills discussion becomes progressively more sophisticated as the series advances.

- The *Apprentice* Level focuses on titles commonly read by high school freshmen.
- The *Journeyman* Level focuses on titles commonly read by high school sophomores.
- The *Craftsman* Level focuses on American Literature titles commonly read by high school juniors.
- The *Master* Level focuses on British Literature titles commonly read by high seniors.

The names of the levels, which stress that writing is a *craft*, were inspired by the "guild" system of medieval times. A young person wishing to become proficient in a craft would first have to serve an apprenticeship under a master. After grasping the rudiments of the craft, the apprentice would then spend time "on the road" as a journeyman further improving his proficiency. After establishing himself as a craftsman, the practitioner still faced the challenge of producing a "masterpiece" before the guild recognized him as an official master of the craft. The new master could them take on an apprentice of his own, ensuring that excellence in the craft would live on.

The great authors featured in these books, established masters of their craft, are now ready to "take on" new apprentices.

The term "master class" itself refers to a teaching tradition in the arts, most notably in classical music. A school will bring in a "maestro" to work with up-and-coming instrumentalists, sometimes on a one-to-one basis. These master classes focus on technique, as no one has more to teach aspiring artists about proficiency than expert practitioners. In the art of writing, the expert practitioners are the very authors whose work students read. A master like Charles Dickens or Jane Austen can "visit" the classroom at any time.

Enjoy hosting your own *Master Classes*.

Lesson One—Hooks

Definition: A hook is a device for grabbing the reader's attention at the beginning of an essay or any other piece of writing.

Thanks to film and television adaptations, millions of people are familiar with the character of Scrooge the miser without having read Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. *So it can come as a surprise that the story opens not with Scrooge but with his late business partner:*

"Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to.

"Old Marley was as dead as a door–nail.

"Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door–nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin–nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door–nail."

This insistence that Marley is dead is a great hook for several reasons: First, it establishes just how confident and "in charge" the writer is. Second, though ostensibly talking about Marley, the hook also introduces Scrooge, the character who really matters, just as in an essay your hook introduces the thesis/main idea, which really matters. Finally, it prompts the reader to ask questions: *Why does this matter? Why is the writer being so emphatic?* The reader can find answers to these questions only by reading on. In other words, the reader is *hooked*.

Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street *tells the story of a Mexican-American girl, Esperanza Cordero, through a series of vignettes or very short stories. As each of these vignettes can be read independently, Cisneros has to hook the reader each time. Here is the opening of a vignette entitled simply "Sally," about one of Esperanza's school friends:*

"Sally is the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke."

In such a short piece of writing, there is no time for the clever indirection with which Dickens opens *A Christmas Carol*; Cisneros gets down to business by firmly establishing Sally in the reader's mind. She does this by creating vivid images, in this case through the use of figurative language. Opening an essay with an arresting simile or metaphor is an excellent way of stimulating the reader's interest.

Chaim Potok's novel The Chosen *chronicles the friendship between two Jewish boys, Reuven Malther and Danny Saunders, growing up in Brooklyn, New York, during the 1940s. Though the boys are virtual neighbors, they are in some ways worlds apart because of their fathers' differing religious beliefs. The opening sentence neatly captures this mixture of closeness and distance:*

"For the first fifteen years of our lives, Danny and I lived within five blocks of each other, and neither of us knew of the other's existence."

Potok's sentence shows us that you don't have to reach for poetic language, as Cisneros does, to create an effective hook. A strong assertion such as the one above can do the trick, especially if it intrigues the reader and establishes the writer's sure command over his or her subject matter.

We've all had this experience (see, that's a hook right there; you want to know *what* experience): starting to read an article or story because we are *obligated* to, and then reading on *willingly* because we are hooked.

Consider that your teacher is in a similar position when it comes to reading your papers: he or she has an obligation to grade your writing, but if you can turn your teacher into a willing reader, then you are on the road to writing success, and good grades. To be sure, many ingredients besides an effective hook go into making your writing a "pleasure to read"—ingredients which will be examined in the lessons to come. A good hook, however, is a great start. It not only grabs your reader's attention but also indicates the *quality* of the writing to follow.

A good opening rarely comes about by accident; it is the result of a deliberate strategy. If you are writing an essay on the theme of power in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, for example, you might say, *I'll open by comparing Caesar to another dictator, or I could use a quotation from that other Shakespeare play about power,* Richard III, *my teacher mentioned.*

In adopting such a strategy, keep in mind that your hook is <u>not</u> the same thing as your thesis/main idea. The hook is part of the introduction, that section of the essay that not only previews the main points of your argument/analysis but also leads up to the thesis. In olden days, a servant walked ahead of a lord and lady to herald their arrival at an important function; similarly, the hook heralds the arrival of the thesis and the argument.

That medieval herald would of course be no slouch but smartly dressed and well spoken—to set the tone for the dignitaries' arrival. In the same manner, you want your hook to be as smart and impressive as the thesis and argument you've spent time developing and crafting.

So, sticking with our example of a paper exploring the theme of power in *Julius Caesar*, which of the following opening sentences would entice *you* to read on? Pick two out of four:

1. Lord Acton might have just attended a performance of *Julius Caesar* when he noted that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

2. In *Julius Caesar*, power is a corrupting influence.

3. In this essay, I will examine the corrupting influence of power in *Julius Caesar*.

4. In *Julius Caesar*, power is an intoxicating but often poisonous brew.

Hopefully, you picked openings #1 and #4, which hook the reader with a quotation and metaphor, respectively. Opening #2, while a solid enough sentence (it reads more like a first attempt at a thesis), is will hardly grab a reader's attention. Sentence #3, with its plodding announcement of intention, is the worst. The reader would much prefer for the writer to get on with presenting the argument than making promises that an argument will materialize.

Practice:

Note to teachers and students: The following exercise can be easily adapted to your current writing assignment.

You have been asked to write an essay on our culture's dependence on communications technology. Choose three of the following opening strategies and create possible hooks for such an essay. After each sentence, give a brief explanation of what makes it an effective opening sentence.

- A bold assertion
- A question
- A figure of speech
- An image
- An analogy
- A specific fact
- A quotation
- A mythological, Biblical, or literary allusion
- A historical parallel

MY SENTENCES:

1.

Explanation:

2.

Explanation:

3.

Explanation:

Essay:

Taking a recent fiction-reading assignment as your subject, write a brief but well-organized essay tracing the main character's development during an important phase of the story. Consult with your teacher as to what constitutes that "important phase": in the case of a short story, it might be the whole text; in the case of a novel, it might be the first dozen chapters.

In writing this essay, pay particular attention to the creation of your hook, and its relevance to your thesis.

For example, say you have been asked to write about Pip's development in Part II of Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The essential point you want to make (your thesis) is that Pip's development is superficial. You will come to that in due course. Right now, you want to grab the reader's attention.

You could begin, as Cisneros does, by creating vivid pictures in the reader's mind, with an image or figure of speech:

Pip's self-knowledge is as foggy as the London streets he strolls down.

Or you could start with a question:

What does it really mean to be a gentleman?

(A word of warning, however, about questions: they can back-fire. Remember, in the course of your argument, to provide an answer. In the case of a rhetorical question, consider whether a reasonable and informed reader will give the answer you anticipate.)

You could simply begin, as Chaim Potok does, with a compelling authoritative statement:

In Part II of *Great Expectations*, Pip's wish comes true: he becomes a gentleman, and this turns out to be both a blessing and a curse.

Or you could use an epigraph, an apt, ice-breaking quotation. The quotation could come from the work under discussion, or, more intriguingly, from another text such as a poem, play, critical essay, or another work from the same author:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times …"

In the famous opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens is reflecting on the French Revolution, but he might very well be evaluating the second phase of Pip's personal history in *Great Expectations*.

Whichever strategy you choose, make sure your essay is well launched, and heading in the same direction as your thesis!

Suggested Responses

Lesson Seven—Suggested Responses

1. Realizing that the job amounted to nothing but hard work, long hours, and inadequate compensation, Kristy quit.

2. Brainstorming, revising, and proofreading are some of the important stages of George's writing process.

3. During our week in the country there will be time to relax, time to talk, and time to reflect

4. Composing prolifically, rehearsing tirelessly, and performing exuberantly, Barton became a beloved musical figure.

5. If you want to know where I go, what I do, and how I feel, then I suggest you read my blog.

6. To pass the class you must attend the seminar; to impress the teacher you must contribute opinions.

7. The student who wrote the winning entry and the teacher who sponsored her have both been invited to the awards ceremony in Washington, D.C.

8. At the beginning of the movie, Paul is a timid boy; in the middle, he is a rowdy adolescent; by the end, he is a mature adult.

9. Wherever he goes and whatever he does and whomever he meets, Trevor is always a gentleman.

10. On her European vacation, Marcia enjoyed not only the running of the bulls but also the leaping of the lords.

Additional Activities

Activity 5

Note for Teachers:

After gaining confidence from working with the poem featured in the Practice in Lesson Nine (Diction), the student should be ready to *find* a poem that features a "family" of words. As in Activity 1, working in conjunction with the school librarian may be productive. Students can also use the Internet to search public-domain poetry. Directing students to specific bodies of work, such as Shakespeare's sonnets or Keats' odes, will make this a more efficient activity.

It's important to emphasize to students that they do not have to have anything approaching a full comprehension of the poem in order to recognize a word family; they just need to recognize—and highlight or circle—a verbal pattern. They may have to read multiple poems before finding such a "family," which should have at least three "members"; six or more would be impressive.

Students can use the worksheet on the following page to record their work.

STUDENT NAME: _____

Worksheet: Diction: Word "Family"

**** If your word family does not have at least <u>three</u> "members," select another poem.**

Title of Poem Selected: _____

Poet: _____

Explain what all the words in this "family" have in common (for example, they all pertain to nature, agriculture, war, travel, music, etc.):

_____

List the members of the word family, citing in each case the relevant line number.

1. _____ (line)

2. _____ (line)

3. _____ (line)

4. _____ (line)

5. _____ (line)

6. _____ (line)

7. _____ (line)

8. _____ (line)

9. _____ (line)

10. _____ (line)

11. _____ (line)

12. _____ (line)

INDEX OF AUTHORS AND TITLES
(Lesson numbers are in parentheses)

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

The following objectives are addressed throughout this book, and many of them are touched on in every lesson. The list of objectives in the lesson-by-lesson correlations, therefore, is not exhaustive; rather, the objectives that are a particular focus of each individual lesson are noted.

The student will be able to:

A Use imagery and figurative language to enhance meaning
B Use a variety of sentence structures
C Organize ideas to enhance coherence and logical progression
D Provide specific support for ideas
E Apply prewriting strategies to generate ideas
F Use effective sequence and transitions
G Revise drafts to improve organization and style
H Analyze published pieces as writing models
I Write in a voice appropriate to audience and purpose
J Use diction effectively to enhance meaning
K Apply specific criteria to evaluate writing

LESSON-BY-LESSON CORRELATIONS

Lesson One—Hooks
Skill Analysis H
Practice C, G, I
Essay C, G, I

Lesson Two—Verbs
Skill Analysis H
Practice B, G
Essay C, D, G, I

Lesson Three—Supporting
Skill Analysis H
Practice C, D, E
Essay D, E, G

Lesson Four—Figurative Language
Skill Analysis H
Practice A, E
Essay A, D, E, G