

# BREAKING THROUGH THE “I DON’T KNOWS”

## *Five Practical Strategies to Unlock Student Writing Potential*

by Victoria Gauthier

To many elementary school teachers, it is a familiar scenario: it is time for language arts, and students are asked to conjure something up—a story, play, skit, poem, essay or other form of written expression. Some pupils are eager, seemingly unable to wait to put pencil to paper and make their inner visions a reality. Others give an answer that, although honest, we as educators hate to hear: “I don’t know what to write.” Quickly we suggest the tried-and-true—the brainstorming, mind mapping and list-making techniques that we ourselves sometimes rely on to get us out of a creative bind. Here are five more strategies to help students unlock the originality that lies within.

### **Feature Fine Art**

Visual learners often need stimulation in order to generate ideas, and what better way to introduce a piece of history into language arts than to display a prominent piece of fine art and use it to lead a group sharing session? Choose something that is easy to create a story around, preferably a famous piece by a well-known artist, such as *The Starry Night* by Vincent Van Gogh. Students may have seen the work before (and if they haven’t, so much the better). Explain that they’re going to use the mood and features of the painting to create the basis for a storyline. Discuss elements such as location, possible characters, events and feelings associated with the work, having students jot down notes of only the ideas they find most interesting for use in their own writing. Try not to explain the painting or its origins until the session is finished, allowing the students to find their own connections to the work. They will now be equipped with several ideas to incorporate into their writing.

This method is a great way to incorporate technology use in the classroom, either by allowing older students to find their own fine art pieces for inspiration in a computer lab, or displaying a piece to a large group using an interactive white board or overhead projector which allows them to view the work up close.

### **Provide a Jumping-off Point**

Sometimes when students are stuck, they have an idea of what to write, but just don’t know how to begin. Whether teacher-provided or student-generated, jumping-off points are useful because they bridge the gap

between what students know and what they want to express. They provide strong writers with an opportunity to be more creative in their story-telling, while striving ones can rely on a solid beginning to build upon.

Whole-group activities like pass-the-pen-and-paper games are useful for coming up with creative and sometimes very amusing story introductions (these need to be monitored closely to make sure they remain appropriate). Another method is drawing slips of paper out of a jar that contains beginning sentence(s) for a journal entry or free-write.

### **Stimulate the Senses**

In order to describe something with accuracy, students have to experience it. Have fun with your class by bringing in various objects and asking them to think of descriptive words and sentences for that item using the five senses as a guide (be aware of possible allergies with students when focusing on taste or scent).

With field trips increasingly becoming few and far-between, get your students out of the school to explore the surrounding neighbourhood looking for articles that can be easily described in a piece they are working on. Weather permitting, allowing students to write “on location” outdoors also helps to relieve boredom and provide fresh ideas for projects and assignments.

A list of adjectives compiled from a brainstorming session focussing on the five senses posted in the classroom can both ease the writing process and expand vocabulary.

### **Include Time for Writing Without Rules**

It is no secret that students are often so stressed about following the rules associated with writing that they struggle to be fully productive when the time comes to actually express themselves. By providing students with creative free-writing or journaling time, students can jot down what comes to mind without worrying about spelling, punctuation, grammar or even forming complete sentences. Free-writing has the added benefit of providing mental clarity, in that they are given the opportunity to let go of any issues that are bothering them before being asked to engage with their writing on a more formal level. Skimming submitted journals is good way to get to know students because they provide hints that a student may be bullied or have other issues they may need to discuss with a trusted

adult.

To aid in starting the creative process and help journaling become a daily routine, start by playing some soft music. Reading a short poem or descriptive paragraph or asking students to close their eyes and visualize a scenario that is explained to them can help get creative juices flowing. Asking students to take a moment of silence and meditate on a meaningful quote before they begin writing may also aid in generating ideas. Time the free-writes to about ten minutes to ensure they don’t take up too much lesson time, and change up music styles and read-aloud materials frequently to maintain interest.

### **Allow Conversation to Create Written Dialogue**

Sometimes children ache to chat, and what better way to let them do so than to combine readers theatre and writing in order to teach a lesson about dialogue? Small groups of younger students can be given copies of short plays and have fun taking turns reading the various roles using voice expression, while older students may appreciate the challenge of coming up with their own group-written script for a teacher-assigned scenario. Through experiencing and learning about changes in vocal tones and emotion in relation to the written word, students will be able to carry this knowledge into their creative endeavours, forming interesting and realistic dialogue between their characters. Readers theatre also serves as an excellent icebreaker to get those who are unfamiliar with each other interacting, adding to a greater sense of classroom community.

Although there is not one quick fix to break through every “I don’t know” moment in the classroom, sometimes using our own left-brains a little more when it comes to writing activities helps to spark the same reaction in our students. Don’t be afraid to modify, introduce, or delve deeper into a completely new subject or strategy in order to explore all the possibilities and shake things up to make writing a little more exciting. After all, as William Goldsmith stated, “The easiest thing to do on earth is not write.”

Victoria Gauthier, OCT is a certified elementary teacher happily residing in Sudbury, Ontario with her husband and dogs.



**EPSON**<sup>®</sup>  
EXCEED YOUR VISION



# One Projector. Two Ways to Interact.

**BrightLink™ 455Wi - Now with the flexibility of Interactive Table Mode.**

Make almost any wall interactive by installing BrightLink with the included wall mount or table install\* for interactive use in small-group learning centres and student workstations. One simple solution, two ways to engage.

**Expand your interactive possibilities!**

BrightLink 455Wi gives teachers the flexibility to decide how to set up their interactive classrooms.



See how you can use BrightLink to create i-walls or i-tables. Visit [epson.ca/itable](http://epson.ca/itable)

**Epson**  
**Brighter**  
**FUTURES**<sup>®</sup>  
reliability. support. savings.

\* Interactive Table Mode cannot operate without a mount specifically designed for this purpose. The mount included with BrightLink 455Wi is NOT an Interactive Table mount. Actual mount not shown. A suitable mount is available through Copernicus Educational Products. Please visit [epson.ca/itable](http://epson.ca/itable) for more information about Interactive Table Mode.

Epson is a registered trademark and EPSON Exceed Your Vision is a registered logomark of Seiko Epson Corporation. BrightLink is a trademark and Brighter Futures is a registered trademark of Epson America, Inc. Copyright 2011 Epson America, Inc. Product specifications are subject to change without notice.