

*Journaling: Setting the Mood for Writing in the Classroom*

by Beth Hammett

It was seventh period, last period of the day, and Carly could not wait for English class. She had endured a Spanish test, Biology lab, math quiz, volleyball practice, first chair band tryouts, and a short twenty minute lunch. Now it was time to relax!

Carly entered the cool, dimly lit room, grabbed her notebook, and let out a deep sigh. She glanced at the overhead and noticed a picture of a serene river stream running through the middle of a lush green forest; it reminded her of lazy summer days fishing with her grandfather in northern Vermont. She began writing...

*Dear Papa,*

*I can't wait to visit you this summer! My English teacher has the most beautiful picture on the board and it reminds me of the two of us fishing when I visited last year. I hope we can go fishing again. I know I was afraid to put the worm on the hook, but I know I can do it this year without your help. I loved the tall trees and the sound of the water running downstream. Maybe we could go canoeing this summer, too? Maybe Grandma would like to join us. We could take a picnic lunch and stay all day.*

Love,

Carly

Carly closed her eyes when the teacher told the group to "Finish up their thoughts." She leaned her head back and rolled her shoulders, took a couple of deep breaths of cool air, and relaxed as the sounds of piano rifts transported her to the calm forest setting. As

the lights flashed on, her mind was refreshed for the class discussion on peer pressure from *Natalie: Diary of a Senior Year*.

Students who never journaled before are often afraid to write on the blank pages of their notebooks, yet, after a school year of journaling, I always heard those same students complain upon my announcing journaling was over for the year. Many of my students return to me saying they continue to journal long after our class has ended. But it's the atmosphere journaling creates that sets the mood for writing in my classroom.

Getting students to write, share, and discuss revolves around building a safe classroom environment—one that students feel comfortable writing and sharing in. I give students a few guidelines as we get started: just write, do not worry about grammar or spelling; write about the thoughts that come to mind when you see the picture; springboard (go where will the thoughts lead you); and create, use these as story starters later for writing assignments.

Set the mood before students appear in your doorway. Play music students would not normally listen to: Bach, Mozart, your school's classical/jazz band. There is research to support "brain music" being used to raise classroom grades and test scores. Gary Lamb's series has been purchased by school districts for such purposes. "East Meets West" became one of our class favorites, and students began asking for specific tracks about halfway through the school year. One of my students had a cousin who played piano music, and I had her bring a cd for us. She enjoyed having others ask about his career, and we enjoyed the novelty of having him play for our class.

Dim the lights and cool the room! Let students relax their bodies and minds. Students have entered into a zone of relaxation. Teach students to unwind with a couple of deep breaths and stretching exercises they can do while sitting. This increases oxygen to the brain, and students will be focused on the upcoming tasks.

Write and share with your students. The best example of journaling is the one you create. Students take their cues from the teacher; so take a few minutes to compose, then

share your work with your students. To create a successful classroom journaling relaxation zone read Ralph Fletcher's *Writer's Notebook*. Happy journaling!