



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
**POETRY CENTER**

**Fusing Firecrackers with Narrative**

by Hilary Gan

ex: Elementary School Poet-in-Residence 2010

**Grade Level: 7-12**

**Time Frame: 1 hour**

**Materials Required:** Excerpt from Paul Guest's Memoir, *One More Theory About Happiness*, found here: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12688058>

\*Projection capabilities useful but not required

**Learning Objectives:** To be able to describe an event or major change using description through indirection.

**Prior Skills and Knowledge:** Metaphor, simile, descriptive writing.

**Arizona Language Arts State Standards Addressed (Writing):**

Grade 7:

Strand 1, Concept 1, PO1

Concept 3, PO2, PO3, PO4

Strand 2, Concept 1, PO3

Concept 3, PO4

Strand 3 Concept 1, PO1, PO2

Concept 2, PO1

**Sequence of Activities**

**Warm Up, 10-15 minutes.**

Take the students outside and ask them to write about something they observe, or ask them to write about an object in the room, or even one you provide. Tell them to stick to facts. Ask them to describe the object they see—a tree, the blackboard, their favorite stuffed animal from when they were little—as if they were describing it to someone who had never seen it. If necessary, have them rewrite to remove any comparisons or language that isn't directly descriptive. Show students the first paragraph of the example exercise.

**Discussion, 25-30 minutes.**

*Read excerpt from the prologue of Paul Guest's memoir:*

“Somehow I had discovered the powder inside the firecrackers would not necessarily explode. That it would spark up and shower the ground with a few seconds of flinty fire. I would bend the firecracker into a V-shape, its rupture pointing up, prop it on a piece of dusty gravel so that it stayed that way, and snap my grandfather's stolen fire alive in my hand.” (From page 2)

Are there any metaphors here? Are the images clear? What is happening? Why do you think this paragraph helps to begin a memoir?

*Read longer excerpt from Paul Guest's memoir, available here:*

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126888058>

*Follow it with another excerpt from the prologue (feel free to read the original one again, if useful):*

“One last time, I said to myself, flicking the lighter's serrated wheel. Click. Fire. I held it to the broken Black Cat.

Even in the instant, I think I marveled at it, how a shock wave felt, rolling through the body, through my still outstretched hand.

This time: no spill of stars, no bright sizzle bouncing down the slope of the driveway before blinking out in the long grass.

Only the firecracker exploding, its force pitching through my hand and up my arm, leaving it all to tingle and throb, numb meat.” (from page 3)

How does the prologue inform the chapter excerpt? Now why do you think the prologue is included? Why does Guest include a description of setting off firecrackers in a book about how he broke his neck? What information does it add? What does it allow you to imagine that you couldn't picture before?

Introduce the idea of description through indirection, in which an object, person, or event is described in terms of another object, person, or event. Ask the students to identify sensory and concrete descriptions (the shock wave, the tingling and throbbing arm, the V-shape, the flat bike tire) from either the prologue or the chapter.

As a class, practice putting together the images from the firecracker with the description of Guest's accident. Use the example exercise as a model and write a collaborative paragraph blending the language of the two excerpts:

Step 1: Identify the descriptive language in the prologue. Find the very specific nouns, list the adjectives, and chart the order of actions of the character. Ex. Nouns: *rupture, fire, gravel*. Ex Adj.: *flinty, stolen, dusty*. Ex. order of actions: *Discovery, spark, bend, prop, etc.*

Step 2: Write a bare-bones summary of the events of the chapter excerpt, using Guest's language. For example, "I felt unsafe but pedaled on slowly"; "I squeezed the right caliper handbrake but it was only mush."

Step 3: Insert descriptive language from the prologue, where appropriate, to enhance the narrative of Guest's accident. "I squeezed the right caliper handbrake but it was only powder, sparking up and away."

**Writing Activity, 15-20 minutes.**

Ask the students to write a paragraph describing an accident or an important event from their own lives using the language from the description of an object they wrote in the first exercise. Use the example exercise and the class collaboration as a model. The paragraph's idea should be about the accident or event, but the language, description, and imagery should come from the object they described earlier. If the student is having difficulty, encourage them to stick with it and see if the unusual pairing can lead them to see new things about the event or themselves; if they're completely stuck, they can of course change events. The event doesn't need to be serious; it could be a birthday, the time they were the victim of a practical joke, etc. If it's easier, they may write a simple narrative paragraph about the event first, and then fuse it with the first paragraph to create a third one.

**Closing, 5-10 minutes.**

Ask students what they learned about the event and what details they noticed more clearly by using indirection. Was the language easy to work with? Does it help or hinder description and imagery? Which paragraph was the hardest to write? Which was the easiest? Which was the most fun?

### Example Exercise:

The bamboo leaves in the back garden are yellow, brown, and green. They are long and thin and grow along all sides of the stems of the bamboo. Many of the bamboo plants lean to one side or another and their bases have round brown trunks. Mostly they aren't green. Many of the leaves are frayed on the ends or curl. From a distance they look shaggy, unhealthy.

When I was 9, I fell off my bike and broke my arm. I also skinned up the undersides of my arm pits and my legs, knees, arms, and face. I had scabs all over my body. I felt like a walking scab, I was in so much pain. Right after it happened, I was lying in a ditch tangled up inside an oleander bush. A man on a bike rode by and saw my legs sticking out of the bush. He pulled me out and onto the street. Then he rode away. Soon after that, my dad came and carried me home.

When I was 9, I fell off my bike and broke my arm. I skinned my arm pits, legs, knees, arms, face. I watched the scabs change colors from red to brown, yellow, green. I felt like a walking scab frayed and shaggy. Right after it happened, I was lying in a ditch tangled up inside an oleander bush looking at the long, thick leaves growing along all sides of the stems. A man on a bike rode by and saw my legs sticking out of a bush. Soon after that my dad came and carried me home like a round, brown tree trunk.