

Calling on Memory

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Grade level: High school

Time frame: 1 hour

Objective: Students will use memories from the far or recent past to tell engaging stories that include vivid details.

Prior knowledge and skills: None required

Required materials: Paper, pencil

Literary model:

Smoke in Our Hair

BY [OFELIA ZEPEDA](#)

The scent of burning wood holds
the strongest memory.
Mesquite, cedar, piñon, juniper,
all are distinct.
Mesquite is dry desert air and mild winter.
Cedar and piñon are colder places.
Winter air in our hair is pulled away,
and scent of smoke settles in its place.
We walk around the rest of the day
with the aroma resting on our shoulders.
The sweet smell holds the strongest memory.
We stand around the fire.
The sound of the crackle of wood and spark
is ephemeral.
Smoke, like memories, permeates our hair,
our clothing, our layers of skin.
The smoke travels deep
to the seat of memory.
We walk away from the fire;
no matter how far we walk,
we carry this scent with us.
New York City, France, Germany—
we catch the scent of burning wood;
we are brought home.

Sequence of activities:

Introduction (10 minutes):

This lesson is intended to open up a treasure trove of memory in each student's mind. Knowing where to start can be the most frustrating part of writing, but we can call upon the great wealth of our experience to give us ideas.

To begin, discuss with the class these questions:

- What is a memory?
- Are memories always complete?
- Does it matter if we get all the facts "right"? Why or why not?
- Are some memories more important or significant than others?

Then make a list of "types" of memories any human might have and write them on the board. Here are a few possible memory types:

- childhood
- family – relationships
- turning points
- accomplishments
- crises – struggles
- moving

Literary Model (15 minutes):

Read "Smoke in Our Hair" and ask students to circle words or phrases that either interest or perplex them. This can include words with which they are unfamiliar and which the instructor can help them define after the reading.

Discuss the poem with the class or invite them to discuss in pairs. Draw attention to the role scent plays in triggering memory in this poem. Are there particular scents that bring back memories for them? What are those scents and those memories? Oftentimes students enjoy this collective storytelling session, and some will volunteer to share a moment in their life where scent awakened memory. In a more tentative classroom, the instructor could share their own scent memory first as an example. Other senses might trigger memories as well. Things like color, textures, songs, and more can all evoke moments from the past.

Individual Writing (20-30 minutes):

Invite students to jot down 3 memories. They then should pick the one they remember best and write it out using lots of details. They can even fill in parts they don't remember with imagination. Emphasize that now we can weave reality with fiction. Our memories are often incomplete, and if we write only what we remember, they probably won't be very interesting. Adding details and imagery will help make the story more intriguing. For example, you might not actually remember the forest you walked through at age 5, but you can use your imagination to describe the soft snow, the footprints of a fox, and the bitter air against your skin.

Each student will write at their own pace. If they complete one memory, they should move on to the others from the list they started at the beginning of the exercise.

Extension Activity: Simile Exercise

Explain that similes are a special device which adds flavor to our writing. It makes our story intriguing and imaginative. Similes draw comparisons between two otherwise unlike subjects. Similes always use “like” or “as” to make the comparison. Similes can also help us understand and visualize more fully the details of a story. For example, you could write “The car horn sounded loud”, but how much more captivating to write “the horn blared like an angry elephant.”

Use these sentences to make similes with the class, writing their ideas on the board, or even inviting students to come up and fill in the blank themselves.

The car horn sounded like a _____

Those words were sweet as _____.

Those words were bitter as _____.

The kittens were soft like _____.

Let them think of a few others.

Students can then comb through their memory writing and find at least one place where they could write a simile.

Extension Activity: Sharing

Peer sharing for this exercise should be optional, as some people choose to write about sensitive memories or may feel embarrassed for whatever reason. Of course, not all memories are sensitive, but it will help students feel free to write more, write bold, and write from their hearts if they don't think their fellow classmates will be reading their story.

That said, students often times choose memories they find humorous or bizarre and are excited to share their gold nugget of storytelling.