

Design a Tree House

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I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
—From "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer

Grade Level: 3rd-5th

Time Frame: 60 minutes

Objective: Students will practice descriptive language while designing an imaginative tree house. This lesson is less about writing a formal, finished poem or story and more about practicing our writing skills in a way that is both expressive and specific.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: None

Required Materials: "Tree House" (a poem by Shel Silverstein), lined and unlined paper, pencil, crayons/markers/color pencils for designing the tree house on paper

Sequence of Activities:

Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome students to the writing session and begin with a collaborative game, a get-to-know you name game, or by sharing items/poems/artwork and leading a short discussion. For this lesson, the instructor could gather different leaf shapes from their locale and allow students to pass them around. The instructor could ask students to notice special patterns about each leaf and share their observations. For example, what do they notice about the veins of the leaf? What about the edges? Are the edges smooth or bumpy (serrated)? If appropriate, the names and lifespans of these trees could be shared.

There is so much room for extended activity here if desired. For example, the instructor could share a slideshow of local trees and trees from around the world, sharing especially pictures of trees with unique branch forms or trees that are particularly ancient. This lesson could easily be connected to another lesson on science / nature.

Read Literary Model (10 minutes):

Read the below poem by Shel Silverstein. The instructor could also write the poem out on a whiteboard and lead the class in a collective reading of the poem, which lends itself to a chant-like rhythm.

After reading the poem, ask students if they have ever climbed a tree (give a thumbs up if yes). Ask students if they have ever been inside a tree house (thumbs up if yes). If time, the instructor could call upon a few individuals to share their experience.

Tree House

A tree house, a free house,
A secret you and me house,
A high up in the leafy branches
Cozy as can be house.

A street house, a neat house,
Be sure and wipe your feet house
Is not my kind of house at all--
Let's go live in a tree house.

-Shel Silverstein

Word Exercise (10 minutes):

Take a moment to talk about what it means to use details and specific language in our writing. The more exact writers can be with their words, the more interesting a poem or story will be to the reader. For example, instead of saying “I have a dog” you could say “I have a chihuahua the color of desert earth.”

Practice specific language with the class by providing a list of nouns and asking them to make each one more detailed, either by thinking of “kinds” (kinds of houses, kinds of dogs, kinds of fruits) to change the noun and/or by adding description (could be in the form of adjectives or metaphors. Though they might not yet know these words, the instructor could lead them in a few examples to give the idea).

As a class (writing ideas on the whiteboard), practice making these phrases more detailed and specific:

I have a pet.
(What kind of pet?)

I traveled on a plane.

(To where? On what type of plane? With whom?)

I went to the beach.

(Which beach? Who else was there? What did you do there?)

We ate dinner together.

(What did you eat? Who is “we”? Where?)

Individual Writing and Illustration (30 minutes):

Project the below questions on to a white board or print them off for each table/student. Read the questions aloud together before excusing students to their desks or writing stations to dive into their tree house design. They should write about the tree house using as much detail and description as possible, painting a picture with their words. After writing they can use pencil, crayons, markers, and more to make an illustration depicting their tree house.

Sharing (10 minutes):

If time allows, invite students to share their tree house description. If they are comfortable with it, each student can pass their illustration around, so their peers have a chance to see the creation up close. However, if the class is silent and deep into writing, don't interrupt. If the class has found their flow, let them ride the wave until the end of the hour block.

Questions for Inspiration

What kind of tree holds the house (i.e. mesquite, oak, redwood)?

Describe the bark, leaves, and branches. How tall is the tree? How old is the tree?

Describe where and how the house sits within the tree.

What shape is the treehouse?

How do people get up to the treehouse?

What shape are the doors and windows? How many are there?

How many rooms are inside the treehouse? Describe the rooms.

What is unusual or surprising about the treehouse?

Who uses the treehouse?

What happens inside the treehouse?

What is outside the treehouse?

Draw a picture of your tree house. 😊