

**Improving the  
Blank Page:  
Engaging Creative  
Students in  
Creative and  
Critical Writing**



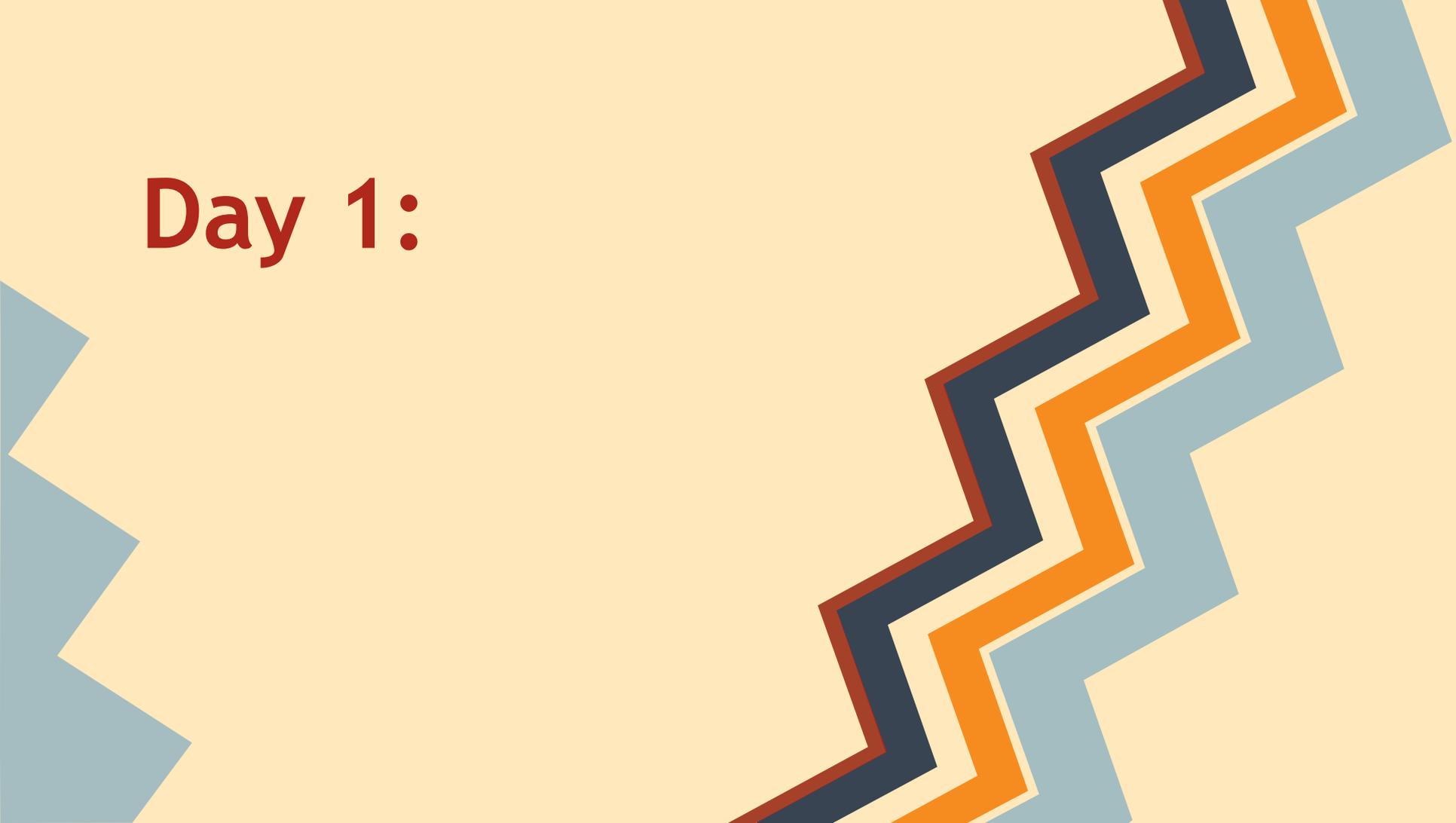
# GEAR UP

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is a competitive grant program of the U.S. Department of Education that increases the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education by providing states and local community-education partnerships six-to-seven year grants to offer support services to high-poverty, middle and high schools.

# AWP

The National Writing Project of Acadiana, also known as the Acadiana Writing Project, was established in 1989. The major goals of the National Writing Project are to improve the teaching of writing at all levels, improve professional development programs for teachers, and improve the professional standing of teachers. The NWP of Acadiana engages in a number of activities that include area teachers, students, and the community of Acadiana.

**Day 1:**



# Activity 1: Word of the Day/ Fishbowl



# How to Choose Words:

-- The teacher may select words deliberately to correlate with the lesson or content for the day

-- Students may all write one word (with their name on it) on a 3X5 index card and place their card in a “fishbowl” (I use a gallon size ziploc bag with the class period written on it) to be selected at random

# The Rules:

--JUST KEEP WRITING!

--The word of the day is intended as a jumping off point to get students warmed up with writing. If the writing strays from the word, that is OKAY! They simply must keep writing, even if they are writing, “I don’t know what to say.”

# Classroom Applications

-- Bellringer

-- Entry/Exit slip with academic vocabulary or topic taught in class

# Activity 2: The Sixth Sense



# Problem and Focus:

**Problem:** Student writing tends to weigh too heavily on the abstract and not enough with concrete details.

**Focus:** This helps students connect to language, balance the concrete and abstract, and make their writing more clear/specific.

# The Process:

1. Start by making a word bank of abstract words and phrases: (examples below)

love/hate

good/bad

peace(fulness)

knowledge

beauty

belief/believe

truth

greed

loneliness

anger

envy

betrayal

fear

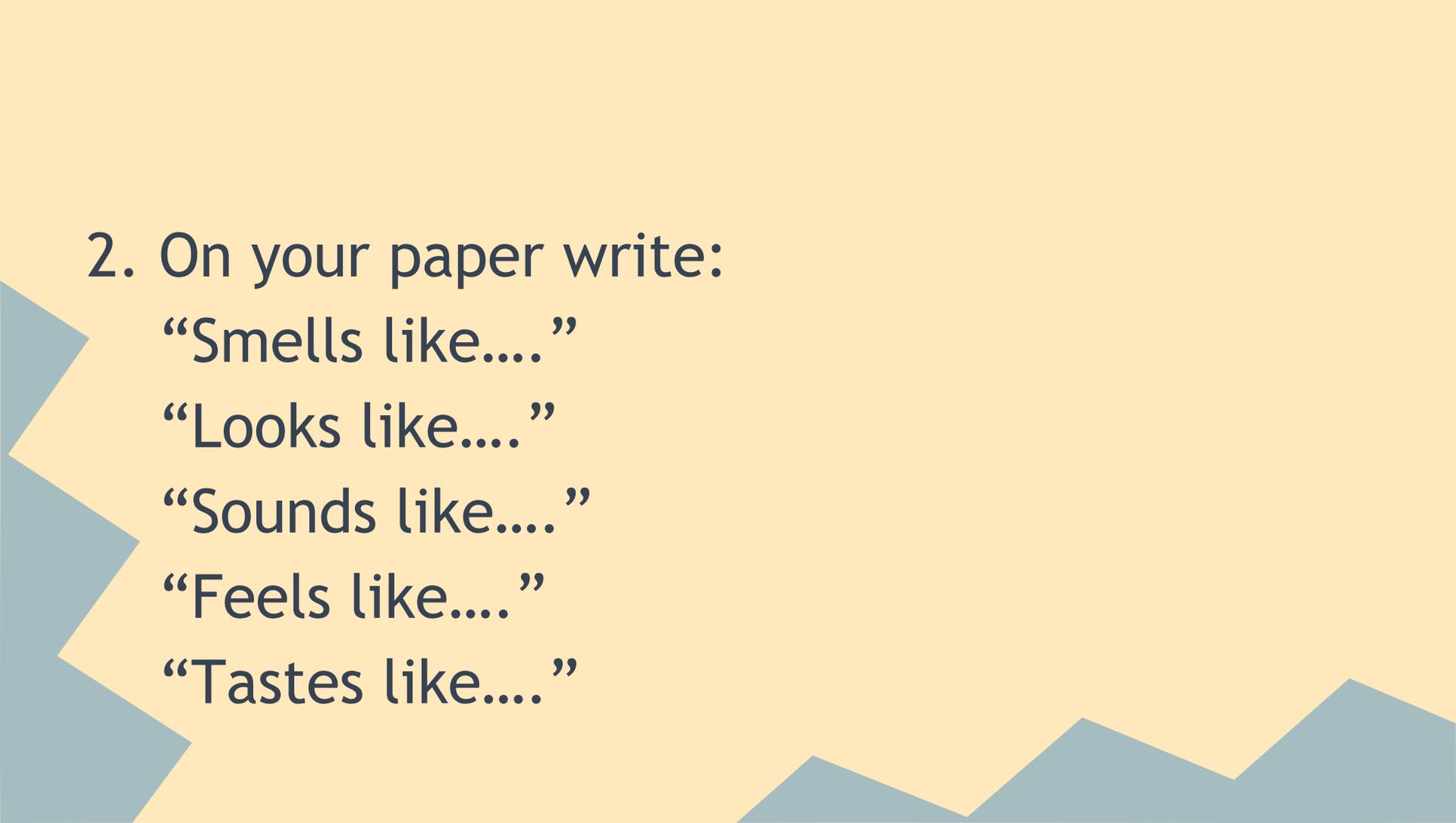
honesty

(dis)respect

justice

stress

hope



2. On your paper write:

“Smells like....”

“Looks like....”

“Sounds like....”

“Feels like....”

“Tastes like....”

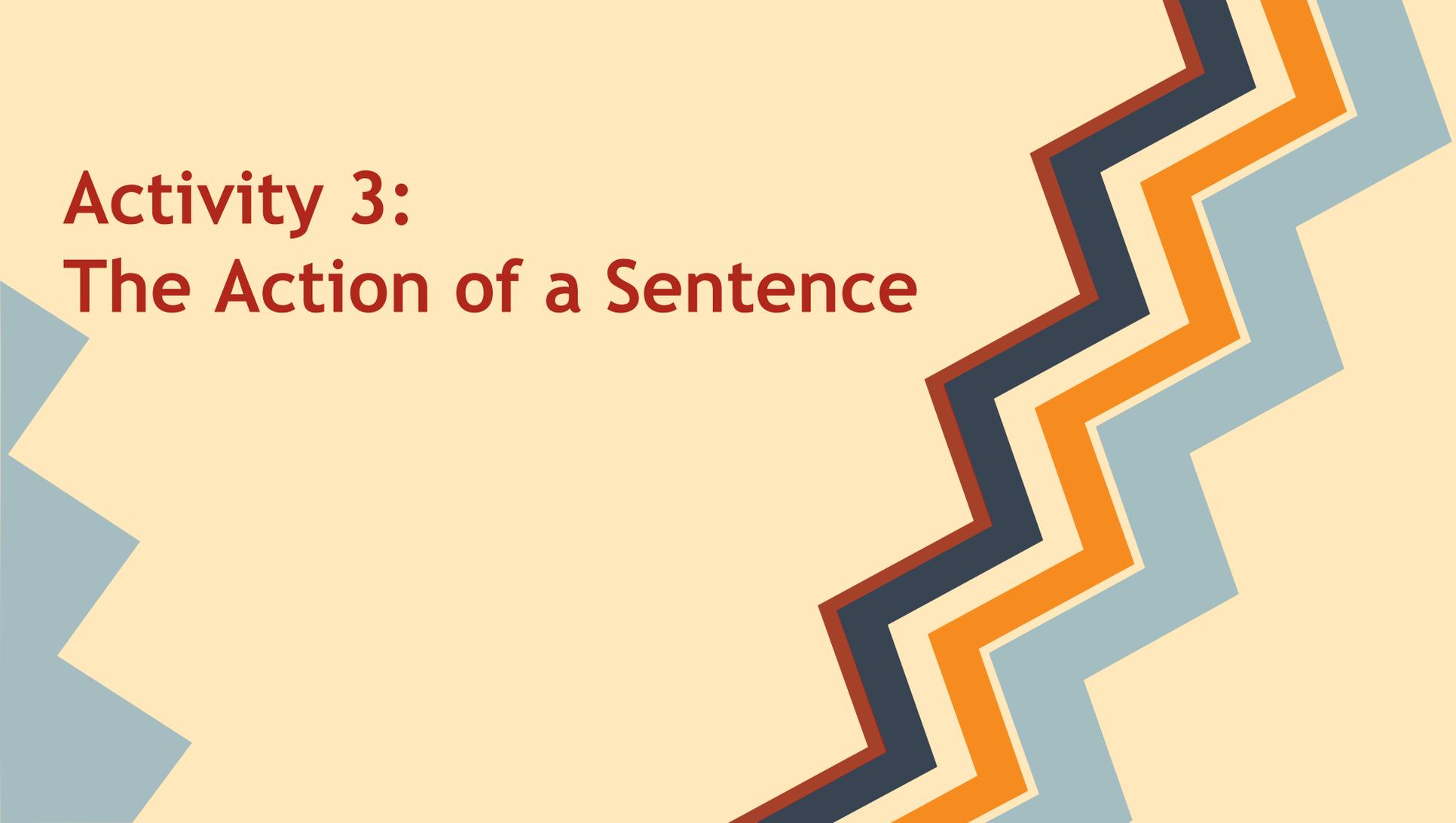
3. Select an abstraction from the word bank and clarify what it means with specific, concrete imagery.

Ex: Justice looks like my Mom's Christmas list when she totals up how much she spent on me and my brother and makes sure the amount spent is the same.

4. Have students use various abstract words from the word bank and mix them with different sensory details (smells like, feels like, etc.)

\*You may choose to ask students to share one example or ask for volunteers. If you make everyone share, always let them know before they begin writing.

# Activity 3: The Action of a Sentence



# The Process:

1. Share the poem, “Young Poets,” by Nicanor Parra (link to poem below)

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/young-poets-2/>

2. Take a sheet of paper and fold it vertically. On the left side, list any 10 nouns (proper or common)
3. Flip the paper but do not open it. Think of an occupation, then list 10 verbs associated with that job. Students may pick a second job to complete their list of 10 verbs.

4. Open the page up so that the verbs and nouns are both showing. Look for interesting word pairings. Draw lines to pairs that you like (come up with as many interesting pairs as possible).

5. Re-write the pairs and come up with an interesting sentence.

\*Remember: You want to avoid cliches or obvious pairings (the dog barks) but you still want the new sentence to make sense.

6. You may choose to ask students: Have you ever gone fishing and not caught anything? If so, what do people say when that happens?

The fish weren't biting.

We got a late start.

A bad day fishing beats a good day working.

People do not say that they are bad fishers though. Likewise, we should not say that we are bad writers.

Also, note that students **have improved the blank page.**

7. You may choose to explain to students why they selected an occupation before listing verbs.

(So that they would not instinctively write verbs that would match the nouns they had just listed).

\*Note: This can also be used to create a word bank for any number of activities.



**Activity 4:  
Cliche Collaboration:  
Creative Twists  
on Old Cliches**

# Purpose:

This activity is intended to get students thinking about language, figurative language, and the stories we tell.

# The Process:

## 1. Make a list of common cliches to avoid:

(see examples)

There are plenty of fish in the sea

No use crying over spilled milk

When hell freezes over/When pigs fly

Born in a barn

Climbing the walls

Don't count your chickens before they hatch

The early bird catches the worm

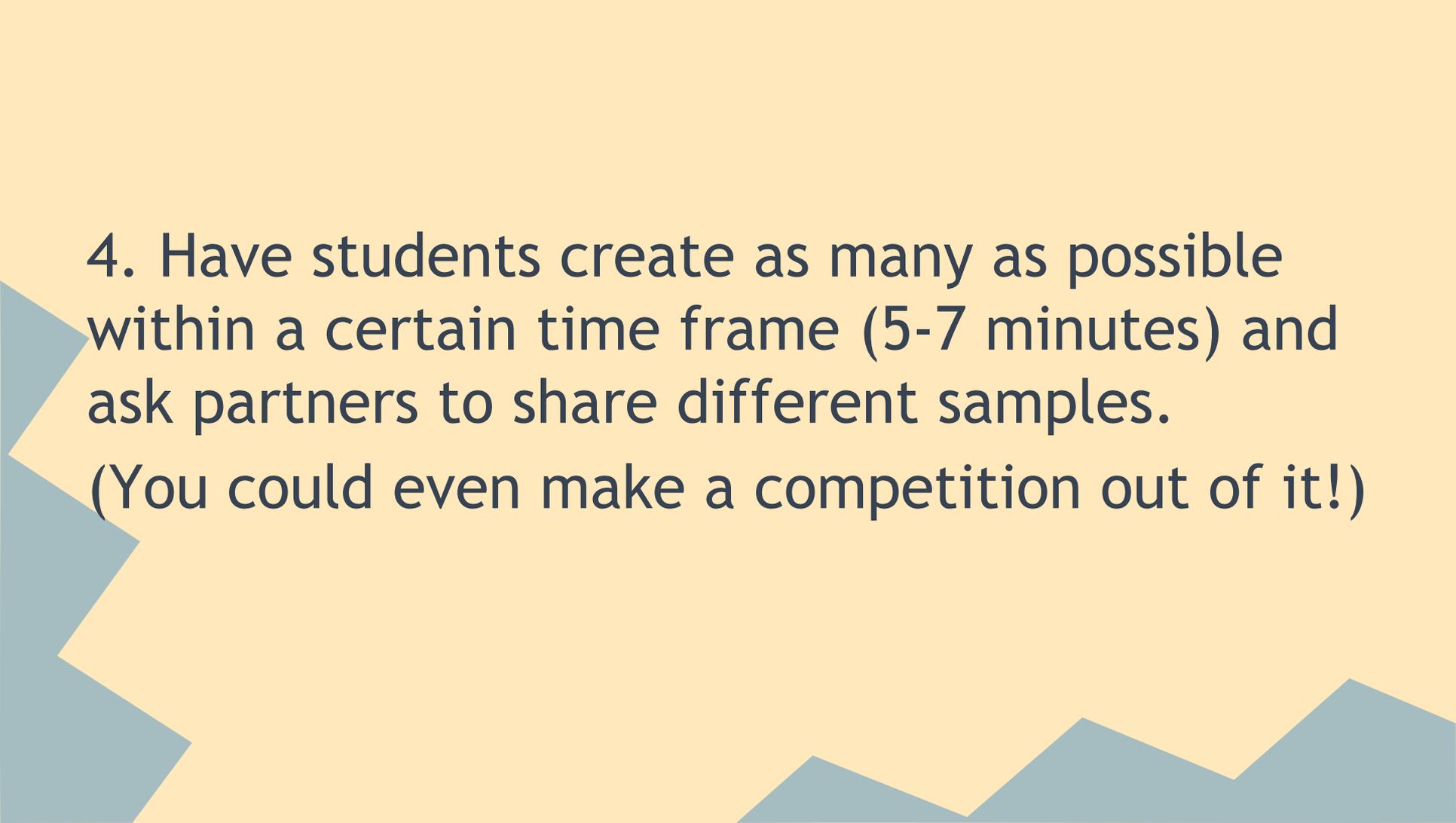
Don't judge a book by its cover

2. Have students partner up and take as many cliches as possible listed and make them “fresh.” Remind them they need to make them totally their own/different while keeping them **concrete** in nature.

For example: You would not want to change “no use crying over spilled milk” to “no use crying over spilled orange juice.”

3. Have students write the cliché, what idea it is expressing, and then a new twist on the old saying. (Encourage them to personalize the new twist).

\*If students are not familiar with all the clichés and what they mean, discussing the ideas they are expressing could be a whole-class activity.



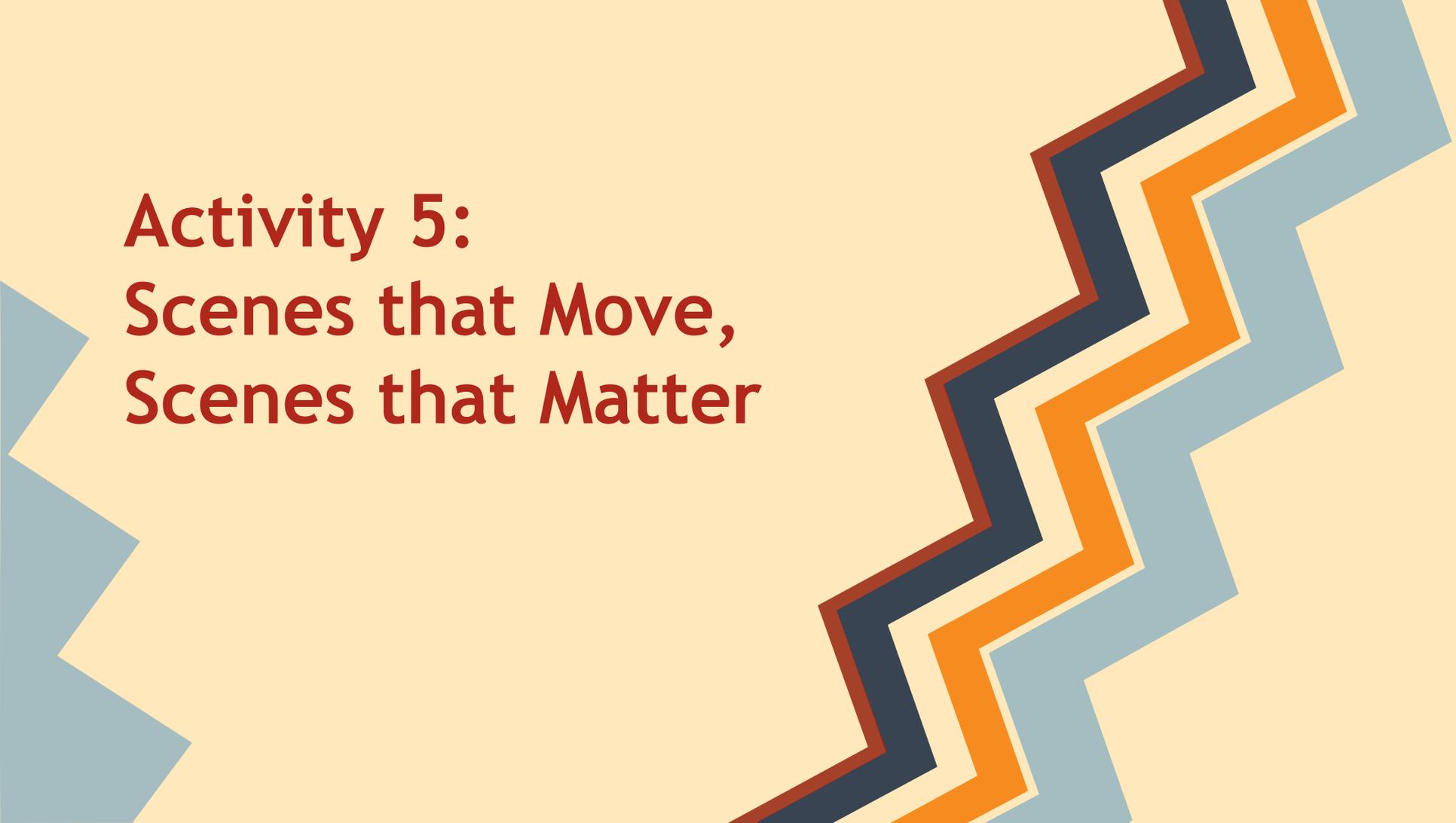
4. Have students create as many as possible within a certain time frame (5-7 minutes) and ask partners to share different samples.  
(You could even make a competition out of it!)

Ex:

Cliche: Don't count your chickens before they hatch.

Meaning: Don't rely on something that isn't there yet/things that you don't have yet.

New spin: Never turn off your back-up alarm until your feet are on the floor.

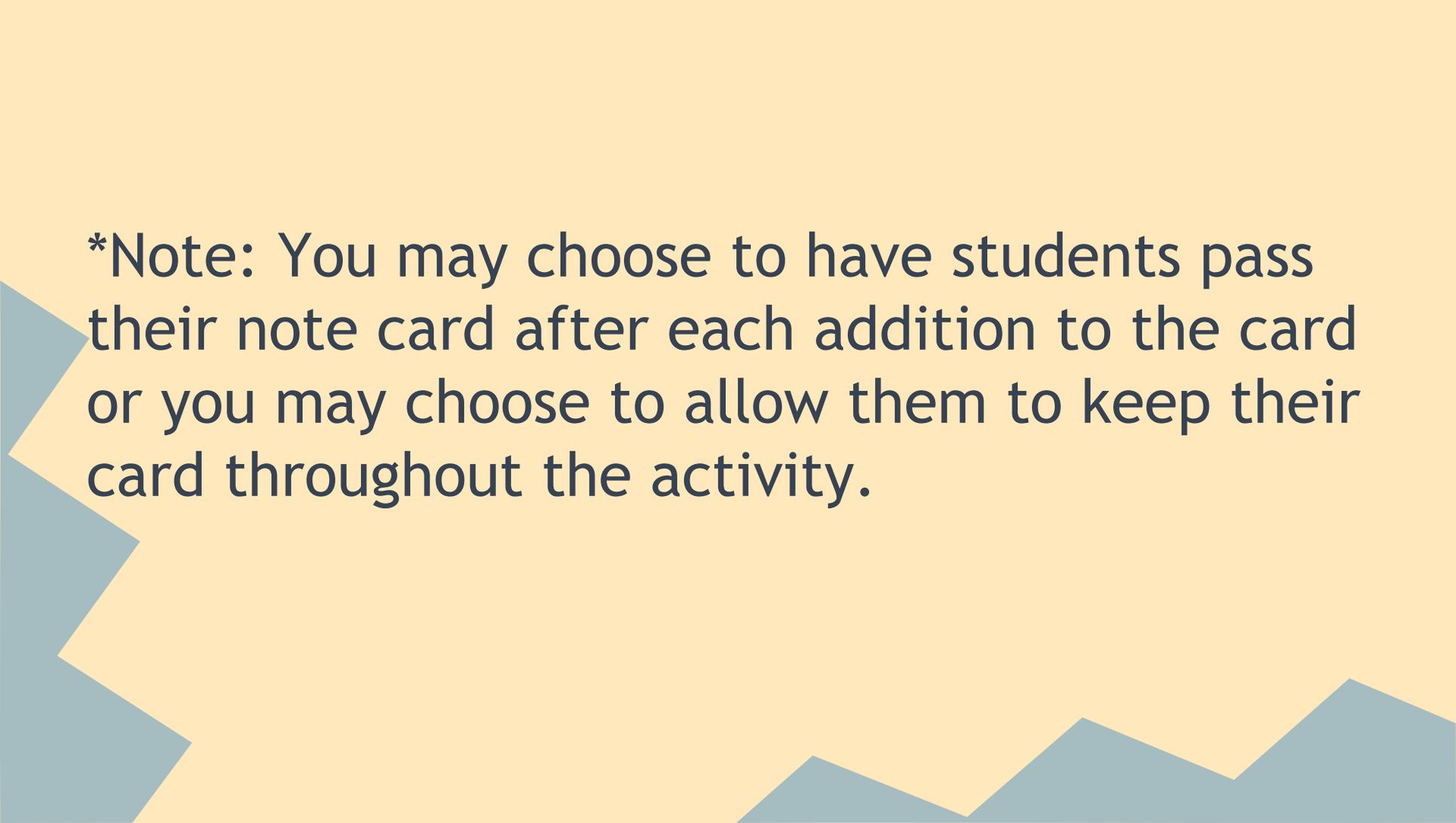


**Activity 5:**  
**Scenes that Move,**  
**Scenes that Matter**

# Purpose:

This activity is a way to ground students in their stories with definitive scenes (beginning, middle, and end).

This can be used for creative writing, personal narratives, argumentative essays, analysis.

The background is a solid light yellow color. On the left side, there are several overlapping, jagged blue shapes that resemble stylized mountain peaks or abstract geometric patterns. At the bottom of the slide, there is a horizontal row of blue shapes that also resemble stylized mountain peaks, mirroring the design on the left side.

\*Note: You may choose to have students pass their note card after each addition to the card or you may choose to allow them to keep their card throughout the activity.

# The Process

1. On a 3x5 index card write:
  - a. Setting → write where and when your scene takes place (interior or exterior, time of day, etc.)
  - b. Plot → write a one-sentence description of what is happening in the setting (try to keep this to two characters)
  - c. Imagery → Create three images that are happening in the scene (use ALL senses)

d. Character → A conflict needs to be happening, some sort of emotional change. (+/- indicates some kind of change)

Ex: She starts off confident and ends up unsure.

e. Physicality → A physical change needs to occur; the more it connects to the emotion, the better. (>/< indicates a physical change)

f. With a blank, horizontal sheet of paper, divide it into thirds and use the following markers to indicate change in the scene:

+ >

+ → - / > → <

- <

g. Have students try the scene in three moments.

h. Write a six-seven sentence summary of the scene.

**\*\*Differentiation:** A group of 3-4 students can share their scenes, practice them, and act them out in front of the class.



# Activity 6: Simile, Metaphor Workshop

# Purpose

This workshop will allow students to practice recognizing, understanding, and writing similes and metaphors.

# The Process:

1. Select abstract (1st blank) and concrete terms (2nd blank) and fill in the blanks.

\_\_\_\_\_ is like a \_\_\_\_\_.

Ex: Memory is like a school.

Blame is like a refrigerator.

2. Ask: “How can these things relate?” Encourage open classroom discussion.

Ex: What does memory have that a school has?

What does school have that a memory has?

3. Have students read the poem, “Tia Chucha,” independently and box any unfamiliar vocabulary they encounter.

<http://chicanopoetrodriguez.blogspot.com/2011/03/tia-chuchas-cafe-cultural.html>

#### 4. Unpack the unfamiliar vocabulary:

- a. make a list of unfamiliar words (shared by students)
- b. locate the word, re-read the line, discuss its meaning whole-class, write notes
- c. If no one knows a word, skip it, have someone look it up and come back to it.

5. Have a student volunteer read the poem and ask, “What lines/images stick out to you?” Have students share lines they like.

6. You may choose to share samples of student similes/metaphors, read, and “unpack” vocabulary as needed.

7. Talk about academic vocabulary discussed throughout lesson.

8. Pick two-three lines from Step 1 and model poem after student sample. Use the metaphors as a springboard. Then, incorporate rhythm, simile, etc.

\*You may choose to do a read around or have students volunteer to share lines.

**Day 2:**



# Activity 1: So Much Depends Upon



1. May choose to share “Young Poets” poem again (see slide 16)
2. Have students close their eyes and the teacher will recite “The Red Wheelbarrow” twice. Ask students to add an additional image to what they are seeing.  
<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/red-wheelbarrow>  
[OW](#)
3. Have students share the added image.

# Background on William Carlos Williams

Williams was a medical doctor during the early 20th century and he would supposedly write poems on prescription pads during the day and between patients.

He had gone on a house call to a farm to see a young girl who was ill but there was nothing he could do for her. He looked out the window of the farm and what he say was the red wheelbarrow, rainwater, and chickens.

4. Have cd with a variety of different songs (one minute clips of 10 different songs is what we did) and instruct students to write continuously for each song, indicating a break between songs and focusing on images.

5. Ask them to circle five concrete images/ phrases they wrote that stand out to them.

6. Have students begin with “So much depends upon” and write a poem using images just circled

7. Encourage students to write several poems, to use different images, and to share their writings.

# Activity 2: Episodic Nonfiction



# The Process

1. Draw a circle in the center of a sheet of paper. Then draw four concentric circles around it. In the center circle write “Education.”

2. Each additional circle represents an age range. (adjust age ranges accordingly for your students)

0-5 → write 6 memories associated with learning during this age range

6-12, 13-18, 19- and up adding one more memory for each additional circle

\*\*These memories can be ANY type of learning.

3 Have students choose 1 memory from each circle they can recall most vividly.

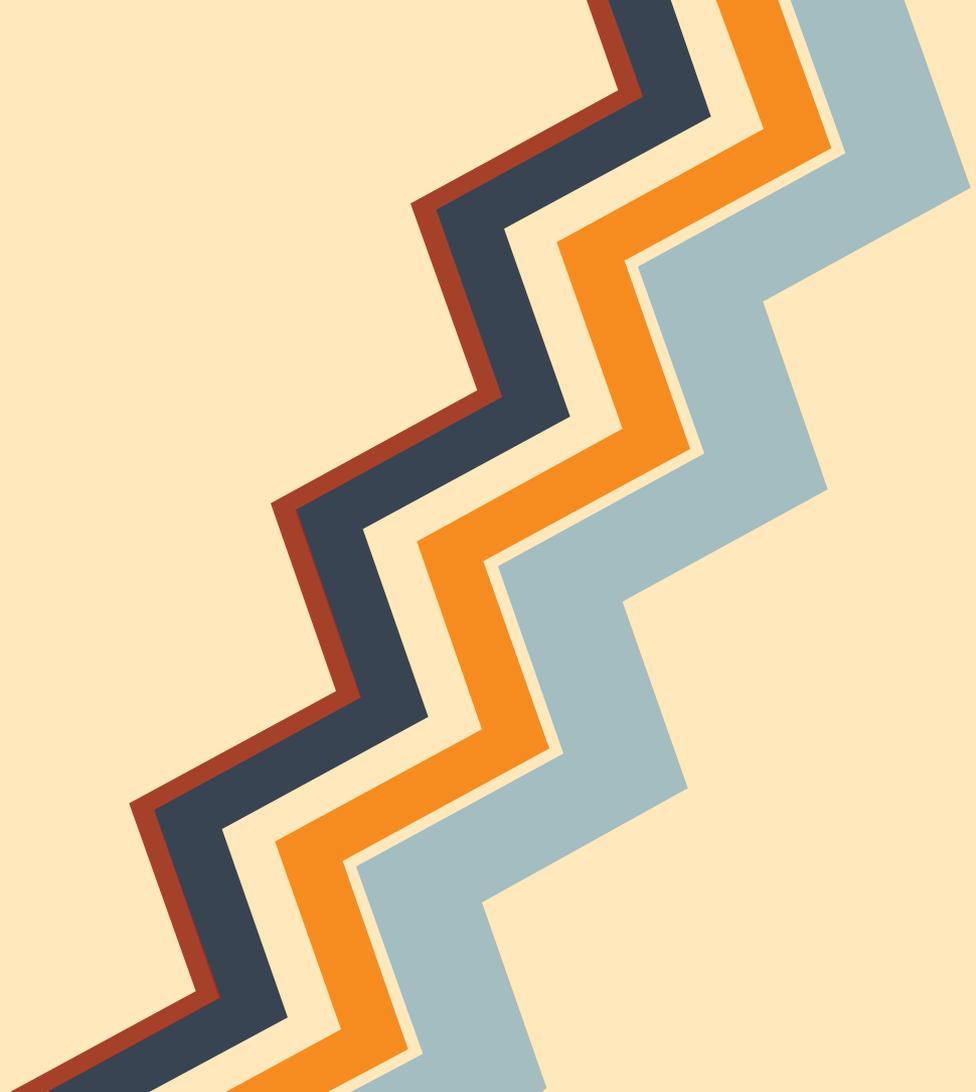


4. Share/read “Ten Stories About Coyotes I Never Told You,” with a focus on the coyote motif and the lack of transitions

5. Go through the 8 rules of episodic fiction.



# Activity 3: Out-In-Out



# The Process

1. Allow students to participate in a gallery walk (in museum or around class) and pick a piece of art that grabs them.
2. Students will write a descriptive narrative of the piece of art using concrete details.
3. Share Philip Levine poem, “The Simple Truth” and discuss the three different sections.

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-simple-truth/>

4. Have students write about a memory the artwork evoked. This does not need to connect to the artwork yet and no transition is required between the first and second parts.

5. Have students pair with a partner and read what they have written so far. They should discuss the connections between the art and the memory they wrote about. They can look for connecting themes as well as images the piece and memory evoked.

6. Write about the connection made between the art and the memory evoked. Again, a transition is not needed for this section.

\*Students may mimic the Philip Levine lines to move from one section of the writing to the next. Then, they can remove these lines later.

Between 1st and 2nd portion: “Some things you remember all your life.”

Between 2nd and 3rd portion: “Can you taste what I’m saying?”

**Day 3:**

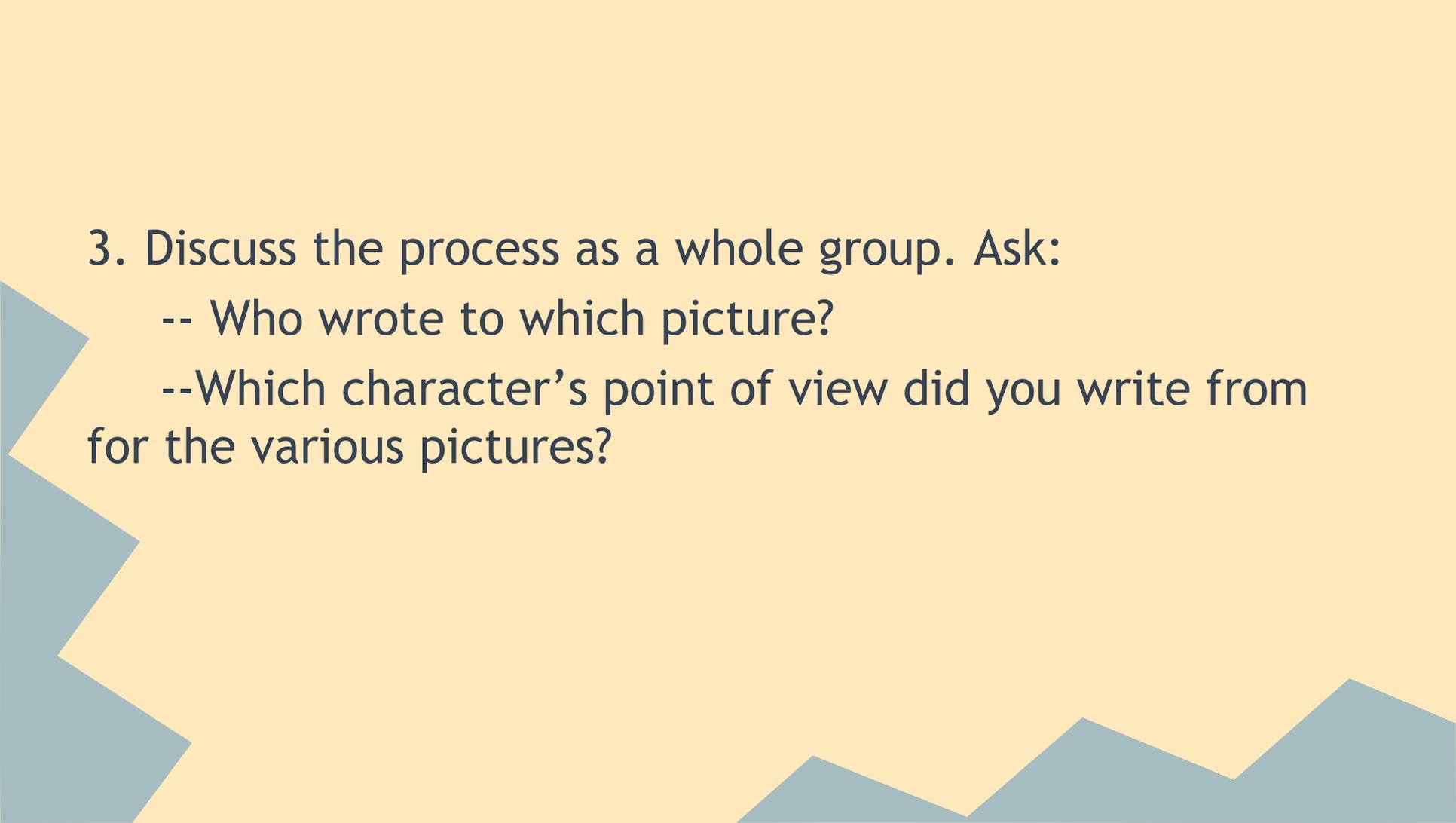


# Activity 1: POV Exercise



# The Process

1. Pass around a variety of photos to music. Students will choose one character from the photo (if there is only one person in the photo they may choose to be the photographer) and write from that person's point of view. This can be done with as many photos as desired.
2. Have students pick one narrative from the photos they wrote about and write a letter from their personal point of view to a character from one of the photos.



3. Discuss the process as a whole group. Ask:

- Who wrote to which picture?

- Which character's point of view did you write from for the various pictures?

# Activity 2: Epistolary Narrative

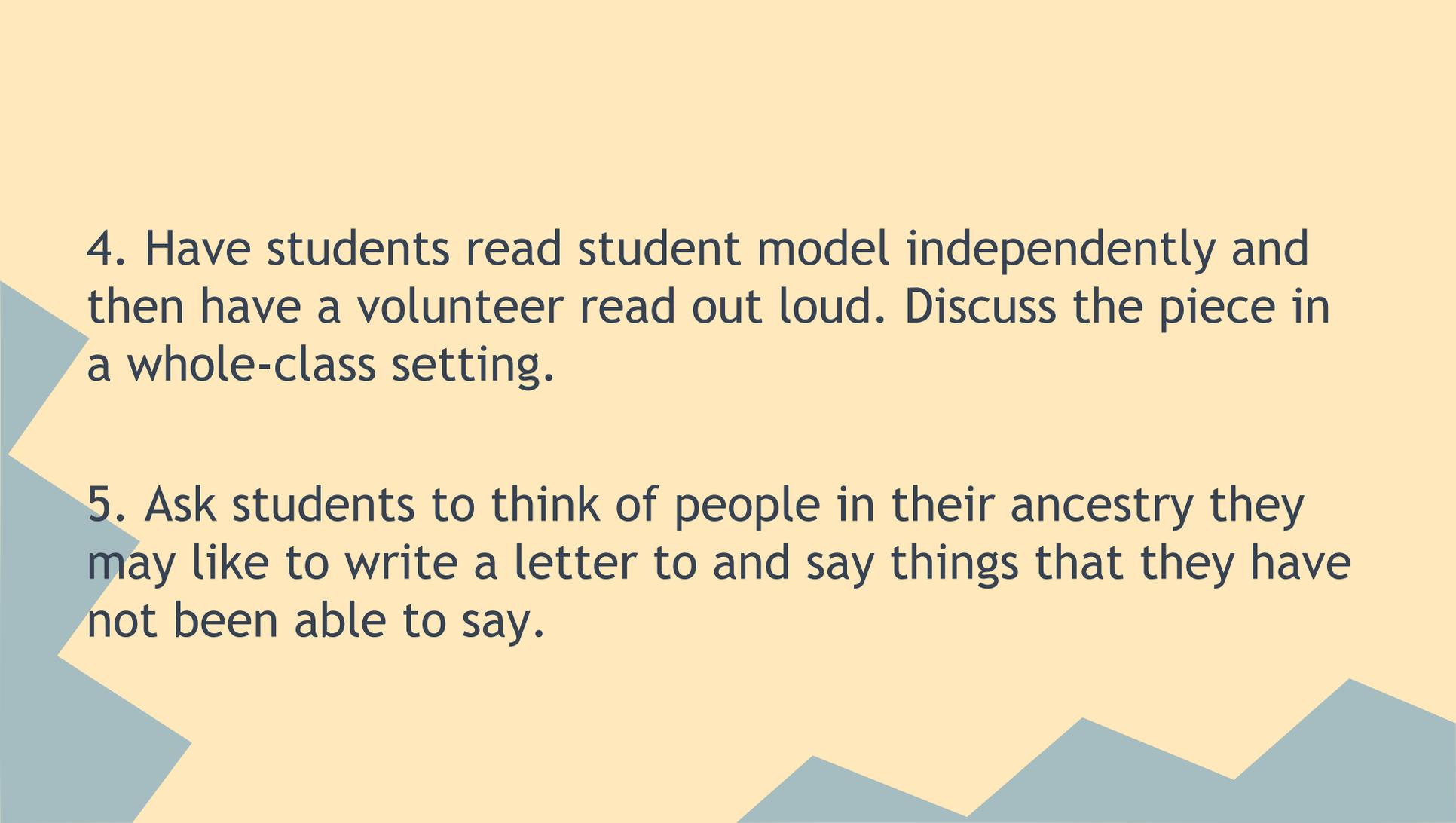


# The Process

1. Have students read “Heirlooms to Tell” and box words that are unfamiliar to them.
2. Unpack vocabulary (see the simile/metaphor workshop for unpacking vocabulary process).

3. Have the teacher read the poem out loud and discuss the piece:

- a. What do you see?
- b. What is being alluded to?
- c. Who is telling this story? Who are they speaking to?
- d. What connections are being made between Alice and the grandmother?



4. Have students read student model independently and then have a volunteer read out loud. Discuss the piece in a whole-class setting.

5. Ask students to think of people in their ancestry they may like to write a letter to and say things that they have not been able to say.

6. Have students select one person to write to and begin their letter. Possible sentence starters:

- When I said....I meant
- I can't tell you
- I've been meaning to tell you
- You may not know this, but
- I want to say

# Activity 3:

## Six word Stories



# The Process

1. Use a restaurant menu to create a 25-word word bank. Encourage students to not just pick “food words.”

# Background:

--Ernest Hemingway

--For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

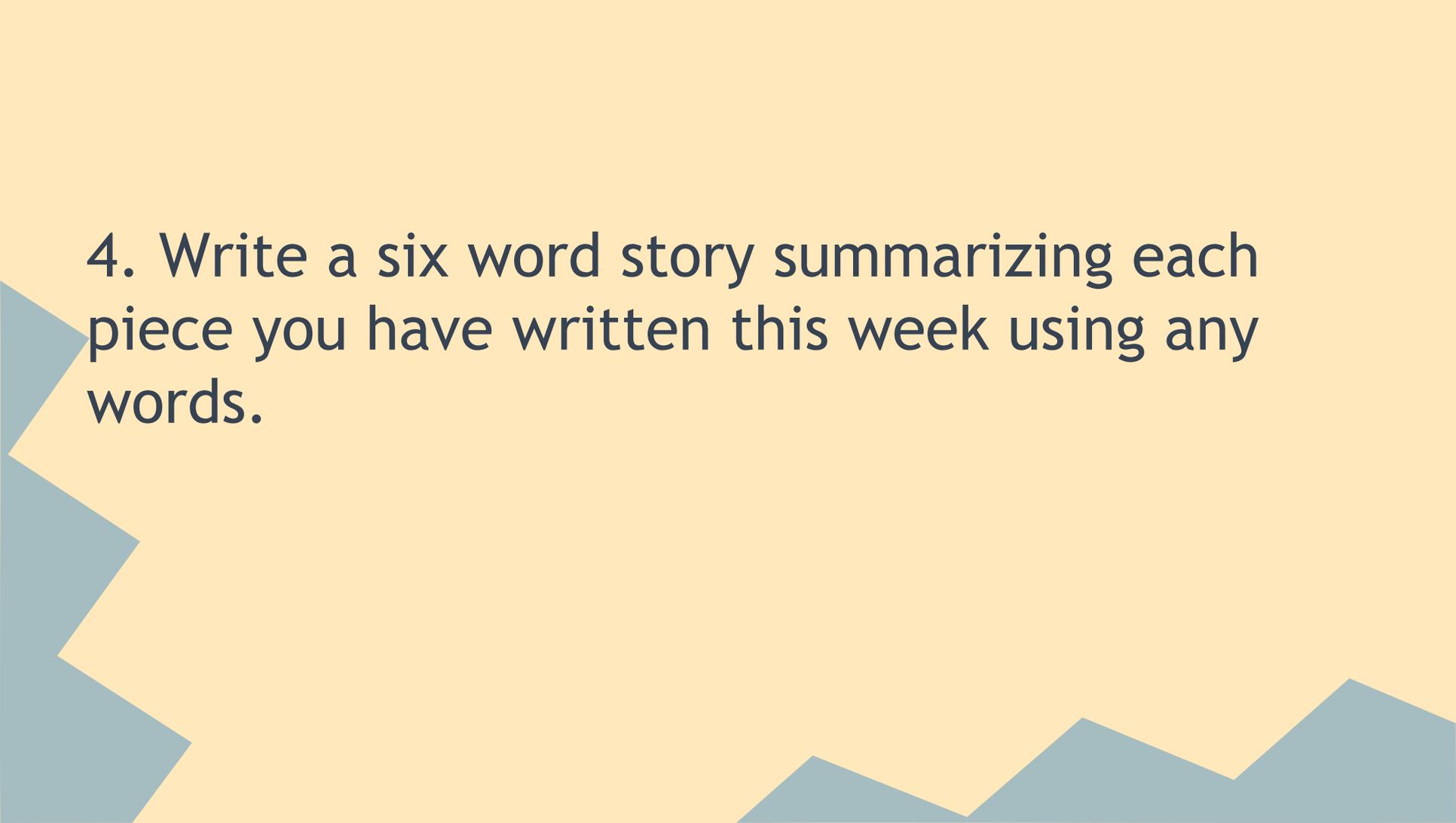
-- Smith Magazine

<http://www.sixwordmemoirs.com/teens/>

# The Process Continued

2. Create **at least** one six word personal memoir using only words from your word bank.

3. Create **at least** one six word story on your educational history using at least 2 words from your word bank.



4. Write a six word story summarizing each piece you have written this week using any words.

# Classroom Applications

1. Improving the blank page
2. Entry/exit slip
3. Condensed review of topic studied
4. Can be used as a starting point to expand on future writing pieces