



Tips for Teachers

A Guide for Using *New Youth Connections*
in the Classroom

January/February 2006

Our 25th Anniversary

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Youth Communication, the nonprofit organization that publishes *New Youth Connections* magazine and other educational materials written by young people. Visit youthcomm.org to learn more about what we do.

Writing Contest Send a Letter to Parents p. 2 Deadline: February 13, 2006

Introduction

Each year we invite NYC readers to write letters to their parents about something they have been reluctant to tell them. This contest generates more enthusiasm (and essays) than any other. Your students will enjoy writing these letters—and you'll learn a lot about them.

They can write about anything, and over the years they have written about everything: cutting school, falling in love, taking drugs, etc. They have written about feelings of love and hatred toward their parents, challenges they face, hopes for the future, etc.

Tips for Teachers is written for the bulk subscribers to *New Youth Connections* to help them use the magazine more effectively with teens in their classes and programs.

For more information, contact:
Youth Communication
224 W. 29th St., 2nd fl.,
New York, NY 10001
212-279-0708 ext.100

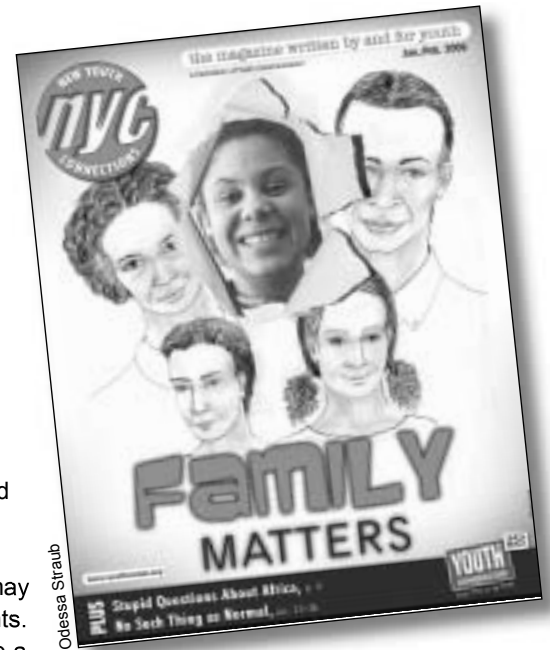
Please tell your students that the letters need not be about dramatic or sensational situations like contracting AIDS or contemplating suicide. Any situation or feeling can produce a letter that's likely to be published: breaking a plate, anger about not getting a gift, cutting a class, unspoken love for the parent or a sibling. On a humorous note, one year we published a letter from a son confessing that he was a Martian. (NOTE: Some of the young people in your class or group may not be living with their biological parents. Remind everyone that they can write a letter to a guardian as well.)

Remind your students that because many of the letters reveal very private information the essays will be published anonymously, and we'll change a few details if necessary to conceal the writer's identity. The winners' names will be chosen at random. PS: If you send a class set please make sure each entry has a name and address. (The name and address should be on a separate piece of paper so we can place them in a hat from which we draw the winners.)

Writing exercise: A Writing Lesson on the Letters to Parents Contest

The popularity of this contest suggests that teens have a lot on their minds that they'd like to share with their parents. You can use the contest to start class interchanges about families and trust.

Help your students get started on this contest by sharing some of the opening lines from previous letters:



Odessa Straub

- I'm writing you this letter to confront you about how I am feeling.
- This is something that you never knew.
- There is something I would like to tell you.
- Ma, I am writing this letter to let you know all the things I did that you didn't know about.
- First of all, I want to say "I love you."
- I have been more or less honest with all my life.
- I guess I'd like to think that I tell you everything but...

Stories to Read Before They Write Their Letters to Parents

Our students wrote several articles about their families for this issue. Reading one of them may give your students ideas about how they can open their letter and

Tips for Teachers is also available on our web site at:
www.youthcomm.org

what they want to write about.

“My Grandmother’s Love” by Lily Mai on page 3.

Lily describes her loving bond with her grandmother while noting the cold and silent relationship she maintains with her parents. Her letter to her parents could start, “How come I found love and support with my grandmother and not with you?”

“Does God Exist?” by David Schmutzer on page 4

David butts heads with his mother over his religious beliefs and his reluctance to participate in Jewish rituals. His letter could start, “I know you want your children to follow Judaic traditions but I don’t know if I can.”

“Suffering in Silence” by Diane Brandon on page 14

Diane loses a brother to AIDS. Her letter could start: “I wanted to let you know how I felt about David’s death.”

“Walking Away from the Fight” by Anonymous on page 17.

Anonymous describes how she tries to deal with her father’s anger. “Dear Dad: Our relationship is not healthy and I wish it could change.”

PS: We published some of the best Letters to Parents in a short anthology entitled “Dear Mom and Dad.” You can buy the booklet through our Web site youth-comm.org.

Writing exercise: writing a personal reminiscence using the story “My Grandmother’s Love” on page 3

Objective: Use part of a story to model good memoir writing and have your students write a memoir of their own. You can read the story and make the lists in class and then have them write the memoir as homework.

1) Step 1: Present your students with a model of good reminiscence writing. Have them read the first three columns of Lily Mai’s story, “My Grandmother’s Love”, on page 3. Ask them if they liked it. Point out aspects of the story which make it effective:

- Lily starts telling her story in the first sentence and puts herself in the action right away. The story doesn’t begin “I loved my grandmother very much and she loved me.” She does sometimes express her feelings directly like when she says she felt safe and loved holding her grandmother’s hand. But for the most part she just tells us what happened and lets the action of the story reveal the depth of her relationship.

- Lily uses two kinds of memories. She describes events that happened only once: the day her grandmother was first on line to pick her up from school, the time they waited out the rainstorm, and the day Lily moved away from Chinatown. She also writes about events that happened almost everyday: watching tv, seeing her grandmother cook, sleeping by her during the winter, how her grandmother checked the temperature of Lily’s food, etc. The combination presents strong images of their life together.

- Lily doesn’t use many adjective or adverbs. When you have a strong story to tell you don’t need them.

- Lily puts the readers in places: the streets of Chinatown, her school, her



apartment. A strong sense of place can make a memoir come alive.

- There is no dialogue, no expressions with quotes around them. Ask your



students if this is a strength or a weakness. Many people think dialogue helps a memoir but Lily decided to skip it.

2) Step 2: Prewriting exercises on writing a memoir about someone they are close to.

- In class have them write down a list of three specific events—things that happened only once—that they might put in the memoir. Then they should make a list of two or three events that occur (or occurred) almost everyday related to that person. (You may want to do this yourself beforehand and present your lists to them as models.) Ask for volunteers to read some items off their lists (this might help students who are having a hard time making a list).

- Ask them to make another list, this time of places associated with the events. Tell them you want to see streets, rooms, subway platforms, stores, parks, etc., in their stories.

- Ask them to take at least ten minutes to look at their three lists. Are there any other items they can add to any of the lists?

- Tell them they must start their memoir like Lily did: describing an event that happened once and to put in as much detail as possible. They should start right in with the description of what took place. They shouldn't "set up" or introduce the situation in the first sentences (as in "I always loved my brother."). They should just start writing about the details of the event in the first sentence.

- If they take their copies of NYC home encourage them to read those first three columns again to see how Lily interspersed the one-time events with the everyday occurrences.

Discussion idea and writing exercise

Objective: Think about and discuss dealing with grief and loss.

In "Suffering in Silence" on page 14 Diane Brandon describes how she reacted to her brother's illness and death from AIDS when she was 12 years old. Diane's story illuminates how some people, teens and adults, try to cope with loss.



If you read the story aloud take note of each time Diane wishes the situation away (you can just repeat those sentences). Or if your students read it on their own ask them to circle these "wishful thinking" sentences. There are many examples of these: hoping the doctors had made a mistake, thinking that not discussing the issue would make it untrue, comparing her situation to a movie that would turn out ok in the end, wishing she would wake up from a nightmare, and simply wishing he could come back from the dead.

After reading the articles ask your group if they've ever tried to wish away a very difficult situation. It needn't involve loss of a loved one. It could be failing a class, the end of a relationship, a tough illness, a bad situation with their parents, moving to a new neighborhood, etc. Do they sympathize with Diane's need to make believe that her brother wasn't going to die?

Where in the story does she try other ways to cope? She did try to talk with her mother (see column 1). How did that work? She took solace in her writing journal (column 3). She wrote the article, putting her name on the piece instead of publishing it anonymously. Have your students tried similar strategies when confronted with painful situations?

What else could she have done? Remember she was only 12 at the time. Does it seem strange that she didn't try to talk with her brothers or her friends? Why do you think she couldn't reach out to anyone?

Ask your students if they think the way her brother died may have played a role in the family's seeming reluctance to discuss his death. Ask them if they know what the word stigma means.

Writing exercise using "Suffering in Silence": At the end of the story Diane reveals that three years later she still doesn't know how her brother got AIDS even though she wished she did know. She also says that she still hopes her brother will come back.

Ask your students what advice they would give to her about feeling better and perhaps finally accepting her brother's death. Write down some of their ideas on the board and then ask them to write a letter to Diane in which they comfort her and help her reflect about her loss. The ideas might include insisting that her relatives tell her everything they know about how her brother got AIDS, talking to her mother about seeing a counselor, reaching out to friends, etc.

Discussion and writing ideas using the story “Stupid Questions About Africa” p. 8

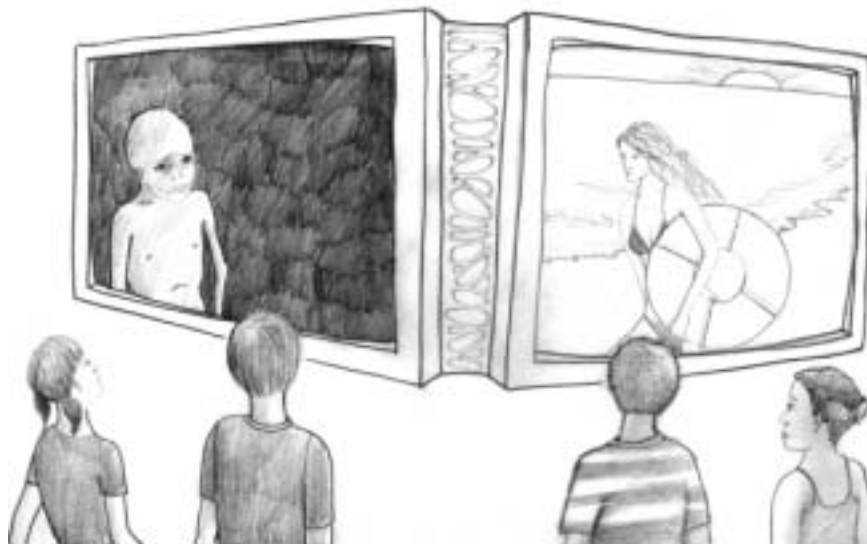
The writer Binyavagna Wainaina recently published an essay titled “How to Write About Africa” in which he offered this tongue-in-cheek advice: “In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates.”

Aissata Kebe agrees that her native continent has become a land of clichés for many of her American peers (“Stupid Questions About Africa” on page 8). She writes about the misconceptions she encounters about her native Senegal and Africa in general. She also describes how watching American television and movies while she was growing up in Senegal gave her false impressions of life in the United States.

Discussion before reading the story: Ask your students if they have any ideas about life in Africa. How did they develop them? (If you have African students in your class ask them to listen to the responses first. Then ask them to react to the students’ comments.) Finally ask any non-native Americans what their impres-

Awards for Youth in Foster Care and Cash Prizes

Do you know a young person born from 1983 to 1992 in New York City’s foster care system? Consider nominating her or him for our 8th Annual Awards for Youth in Foster Care. Cash prizes range from \$1,000 to \$300. The young person must write essays to apply and you must recommend him or her in writing. Call Laura Longhine at 212-279-0708 extension 114 for questions or to get an application.



Odessa Straub

Schmutzer describes a dilemma: He feels caught between his mother’s expectation that he practice Judaism and his serious doubts about the existence of God. Before reading the story ask your students if they have ever clashed with their parents over religious beliefs. Is this type of conflict different than arguing over curfew or school grades? Does David resolve this conflict to his satisfaction?

sion of the United States and New York City had been when they were growing up abroad.

Writing exercise: The purpose of this exercise is not to produce a finished essay as much as it is to get your students thinking about how our views of other cultures—whether they be as far away as Senegal or as close as Spanish Harlem or Jewish Orthodox neighborhoods in Brooklyn—are often distorted.

If possible lead a brief pre-writing discussion in which you ask them to name some misconceptions about the place they grew up in or where they live now.

Assign them to write a short essay. The title of the piece must be “Stupid Questions About _____” and it must have the subtitle “There’s more to my country/city/borough/neighborhood than _____ and _____.” In the first blank they must put the country, city, borough or neighborhood they grew up in or live in now. The next two blanks must include two clichés or stereotypes about the locale of their choice. They then must counter these stereotypes with concrete examples of what life is really like in their area. As you explain the assignment you can point out how Aissata described the city of Dakar with its 2 million people and skyscrapers to battle the image of Africa as a wilderness.

Other Stories

“Does God Exist?” on page 4. David

“Walking Away From the Fight” on page 16. Anonymous describes how she tried to understand her father’s anger and respond in ways that don’t leave her angry and in pain. Urge your students to read it. It’s a great example of a mature teenager realizing that while she can’t change or control her father she can control how she responds to him. It also offers a positive and realistic view of getting help through therapy or counseling. As the author puts it, “Therapy isn’t magic” but it does “give you tools to make things better for yourself.”

Classroom & Advisory Resources from Youth Communication

Youth Communication has published over 70 books and booklets written by teens. Each one is an anthology of the best stories from our magazines on topics like conflict resolution, food and nutrition, friendship, parents, gender issues, identity, resilience, and others.

These anthologies inspire teens to read and help teachers start discussions and improve their students’ writing skills. Visit our E-store at www.youthcomm.org. Or you can get our catalog by calling Loretta Chan at 212-279-0708 extension 115.