



# Tips for Teachers

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

January/February 2008

## IN THIS ISSUE

### Writing Contests—Cash Prizes

Reminder: Your students can enter the contest by going to our website and clicking on the “enter contest” button. Our web address is [youthcomm.org](http://youthcomm.org)

#### Writing contest #187

What makes you feel good about yourself? How and why? This can be a person, place, activity or something about yourself.

**Deadline: March 24, 2008**

### Three Writing Lesson Ideas Related to Contest #187

This contest is a great opportunity to learn something good about your students—and to help them practice one or more pre-writing activities. Here are some suggestions.

#### Writing Lesson #1: Writing Web

Give students a few minutes to come

up with one or more things that make them feel good about themselves. They should write that person, place, or activity in the middle of the page and put a circle around it. Then they should write things associated with that “main idea” in circles around it, and draw lines from the new ideas to the main idea. Then they can look at each of the new ideas and think of ideas associated with *them*. Put them in circles and draw lines.

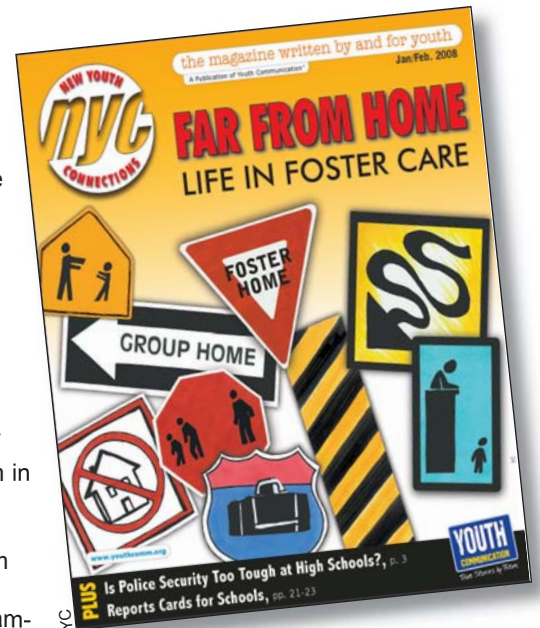
For example, if what makes them feel good is “my family” then the surrounding circles might include their family members, trips they’ve taken, special occasions, etc. If one of the special occasions is “my birthday,” they might have associations to it like, “Got an iPod,” or “Grandmother came.”

By the time they’re done recording ideas, related ideas, and ideas related to *those* ideas—and connecting them with lines—they’ll have a “web” of ideas, and their essay will be half-written.

#### Writing Lesson #2: Telling and Showing

Briefly explain to students that they can “tell” what makes them feel good, or they can “show” what makes them feel good. Good writing includes both telling and showing. For example, they could say, “I love it when my mother cooks my favorite dish.” (That’s telling.) Or they could say, “Even before I open the apartment door I can smell the curry. When I enter the hallway the steamy aroma of rice and peas wafts over me. I can hear my mother singing to herself in the kitchen. She remembered that I am stressed about the test and knows that my favorite dinner will help me relax.” (That’s showing.)

Give students this example, or an example of your own. Then give them a



minute to think of the thing that makes them happy. Ask them to write it at the top of a sheet of paper. Then draw a line down the middle of the paper. On the left side they should *tell* several things that make them feel good. On right side they should “show” how that thing makes them feel good through an anecdote (which is a tiny story like the one about mom cooking).

Students should “tell” and “show” at least five things that make them feel good. Just like with the web, when they are done with this activity their essay will be half-written.

#### Note to Teachers About Problems With the December Issue

You probably noticed that the December issue of *NYC* was delivered in January—too late for entering one of the contests. In addition, the pages were out of order. We had a problem at the printer that was beyond our control. We apologize for any confusion.

**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.

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Tips for Teachers is also available on our website at:  
**[www.youthcomm.org](http://www.youthcomm.org)**

## Writing Lesson #3:

### Interview and Reflect Back

Sometimes it's easier to see ourselves through the eyes of others. Ask students to think of the thing that makes them feel good and write it down on a piece of paper. Then have students pair off. Each student will exchange papers with their partner. The partner will read it and then begin to ask questions about why this particular thing makes them happy. Give them 5-10 minutes to conduct the interview. (If possible, require them to take notes). Then reverse roles.

When the interviews are complete, give each person 15 minutes to write a short essay about what makes the other person happy (the person they interviewed), based on what they learned in the interview. Then have them exchange essays. For homework, each student must then write his or her *own* essay. But they can base it on what their peer heard and wrote about them.

**Warning: Sex and Drugs (watch out for wise guys):** Some teens may decide to write about things like having sex, smoking pot, or other activities that might not be suitable for school. Tell them if they want to write an essay on their own, outside of school, on a topic like that they are free to do so and submit it. But for a class essay they have to stay within the bounds that are appropriate for school.

## Lesson: Writing Expressively

**Story:** "Rewriting the Script" by Alex Withers, p. 7

**Goal:** Your group will see how some writers use metaphorical expressions like "drowning in money" to make their writing more effective.

**Story summary:** Alex describes his first foster care placement. He uses metaphorical language throughout to make his piece more vivid and enjoyable to read.

### 1. List these expressions on the board (before class meets).

Get off my back. = Leave me alone.  
She is drowning in money. = She is rich.

My heart is broken. = I feel very sad.  
My parents treat me like a prisoner. = My parents don't let me do anything fun.

## Writing Contest #186

Write a Letter to Your Parents

**Deadline: February 11, 2008**

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.

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.

### A Letter Writing Lesson

The popularity of this contest suggests that teens have a lot on their mind 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:

- 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 you all my life.
- I guess I'd like to think that I tell you everything but...



(As an alternative to listing both sides of the "equations" you can list only the left side and ask the group to come up with right side equivalents.)

**2. Discuss metaphors.** Point out that the left side expressions don't really happen—someone may have once drowned in money or jumped on someone's back to force them to do something but not very often. The author is comparing one thing (money) to another (water or something you can drown in). Explain that writers use these kinds of expressions because they think they give the reader a better sense of the emotions the writer is trying to convey.

**3. Introduce story and explain lesson.** Tell them they are going to read a story about a young man's conflict with his foster mother. The story has several phrases that compare one thing with another. *Their job is to identify and underline the phrase and think about another way to express the same emotion or idea.* (You can also ask them to write down an alternative phrase on a piece of paper as they come across the metaphorical phrases.) See the teacher's guide on the next page for a list of these phrases.

At this point give them another exam-

ple: the title of the story in which the writer compares his life to a script. An alternative title would have been “Changing my life”—not nearly so expressive.

**4. Read story.** Give out the magazine and have them read the story. You can do this aloud by reading yourself or taking turns. Or you can have the students do silent reading.

**5. Volunteers read their selections** out loud and offer a substitute expression that is more literal. (If the volunteer can't figure out a more literal expression, ask the group to make suggestions.) Ask them which expression they prefer.

**6. Writing assignment.** Tell students to write a one-page letter to a friend about what they did last Saturday. The letter should contain three or more metaphorical expressions.

### Teacher's Guide to Metaphors in the Story

**Column 1**

“She kinda looks like the Grinch who stole Christmas”

“I felt like my freedom was snatched while I wasn't looking.”

The entire paragraph right below the sub head “Could I Trust Her” comparing his life to a story line written by someone else.

**Column 2**

“I sealed myself off from her by enclosing myself in an emotional envelope.”

**Column 3**

“...the house was like a children's jail.”

**Column 4**

“I looked down and froze”

**Column 5**

“...hoping she'd just go back in her cave and hibernate.”

“...staying off our backs.”

“So we played the game right along with Rose...”

“...she started playing the same old record.”

**Column 6**

“Seriously, because Rose was talking about us like we were animals.”

“I wasn't going to just sit there like a lump on a log...”

“I brainstormed...”

**Column 7**

“...my only weapon was avoidance.”

## Lesson: Helping Teens Recognize Their Own Resilience

**Story:** “Rewriting the Script,” by Alex Withers, p. 7

**Goal:** Use the story to prompt a discussion about personal attributes/characteristics that help young people face challenges.

**1. Introduce story.** Tell your students that they are going to read a story about a teenager who is suddenly thrown into a foster care home with his younger brother and sister. (Describe foster care in one or two sentences.) Tell them the writer will describe how he was faced with several problems and challenges while living in a foster home.

**2. Brainstorm on resilient personality traits.** Before you read the story ask your students what characteristics or personality traits help a person deal with difficult situations. Offer an example to get the discussion going: courage. Ask them to define courage. Possible answers might be standing up to someone who has power over you or making a choice that is unpopular with your friends or doing what you think is right even if it means bad things will happen to you.

As the group names traits write them down on the board. After you have five or six ask them to define each one in one or two sentences.

**NOTE:** Look at the list. If the students do not mention these traits, work to elicit them: ability to form healthy friendships, honesty, and hope or optimism. Put them on the list if they are not already there.

**3. Read the story.** As you read (aloud or silently, depending on your preference) tell students to mark the places in the story where the author displays the qualities on the list (or fails to display them, such as behaving in a cowardly way instead of courageously).

**4. Discuss.** After they finish reading the story ask for volunteers to discuss where the author displayed the qualities or failed to display them.

**Optional vocabulary review:** Review the following vocabulary with students before reading the story.

- |               |              |
|---------------|--------------|
| siblings      | endured      |
| instincts     | escalated    |
| episode       | sub-human    |
| stern         | rampage      |
| hallucinating | irate        |
| hibernate     | brainstormed |
| integrity     | ordeal       |

### Get More Teaching Resources at the Youth Communication Website ([www.youthcomm.org](http://www.youthcomm.org))

- You can order dozens of books and teacher guides on topics your students are interested in.



- You can download over 250 stories from past issues of *New Youth Connections* and *Represent: The Voice of Youth in Foster Care*.

- You can download lesson ideas from past issues of “Tips for Teachers.”

- You can find out about writing workshops for young people in foster care.

- You can browse our book and DVD catalog and order from our e-store.

- You can have your students enter our writing contests.

# Activity & Discussion Lesson: Build a Tower of Love

**Story:** Skyscraper of Trust, by Manny Sanchez, p. 16

**Material:** Paper, colored markers or crayons (Optional: packets of colored Post-It notes)

**Goal:** Students will understand that “love” between a parent and a child emerges out of countless interactions. Students will name many of the things people do in loving relationships. They will identify the kinds of actions that parents and teens can take to build loving relationships.

## Build a Tower of Love.

**1. Pre-reading discussion: What is love?** Ask students to define love. As they give definitions, ask if there are different kinds of love. Elicit that there is romantic love (e.g., boyfriend/girlfriend), plus non-romantic love (e.g. between best friends, between parents and children). Tell them that this story is about nonromantic love. [Optional: Love is obviously a feeling. But there is a saying, “Love is a verb.” Ask students what that might mean. (It means that love is expressed in what we *do*.) What do students think about that? Can you love someone, but consistently mistreat them, for example?]

**2. Introduce the story** and the first activity. Tell the students they are going to read a story about a boy whose mother abandoned him and who then found a new mother in the foster care system. Ask them, “What would be the hardest thing about being abandoned by your mother?” (Elicit: missing her, feeling worthless, etc.) Ask, “What would be the hardest thing about accepting a new mother?”

Picking up from what the teens have said in the initial discussions, tell them that Manny found a way to love his new mother, but that it was not easy. (Tell the students that Manny gives a clue in the small headline—“What is it?”) (Elicit, they built the relationship “brick by brick.”)

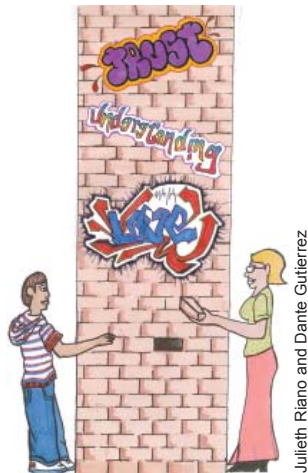
Ask the students what they think

Manny means by a “brick.” [Each brick is something he or his foster mother *did* to build trust in their relationship.]

**3. Read the story.** Tell the students that as they read the story they must circle every instance they can find of something that Manny or his foster mother (Melba) did to build trust. (See box for the kinds of things they should be circling.)

**4. Brief discussion and sharing.** Ask students to shout out some of the “bricks” they circled. (Tell students that if someone mentions something they didn’t circle, but they agree, they can circle it too.) [If students have not noticed enough bricks, elicit a few more items from the list in the box.]

**5. Draw (or build) a tower of love.** Tell students that each item they’ve circled is a “brick” that they are going to use to draw a tower of love. Using the paper and markers, they should draw a building of “bricks” and in each brick they should write one of the things that Melba and Manny did to build their relationship. (The youth can be as literal or as artistic as they like. They may literally draw big bricks and put one action in each brick. Or they can just draw a big house or building and decorate it with actions from the story.) [Note: If you used Post-Its, they can write one action on each Post-It, and then “construct” their building from the notes.]



**6. Sharing and discussion.** Have students share their drawings and say a few words about the actions they included on their bricks.

**7. Reflection: The Foundation of Love.** Remind students that the foundation is the most important part of any building. Even though it can’t be seen (it’s underground), if it is weak even the best building will fall. Ask them to imagine a few words that are the foundation of a loving relationship. (The headline has a big clue to one important word.) Have a brief discussion about why these words (e.g., trust, honesty, caring, consistency, reciprocity and sharing) are foundations of love. Then ask

them to add those “foundation words” at the bottom of their drawing.

## Extension activity

Look at the list of actions in the box below (which should be pretty much the same actions your students have already identified as the “bricks” of love). Ask them to describe the opposite of each of those actions—the kinds of actions that undermine love and trust. For example, what if the foster mother’s face in their first meeting conveyed that he was just another problem child instead of being happy and full of excitement? What if she had been inconsistent in her attention? What if she had accused him of being an ungrateful thief when he took some change? What if she always insisted on knowing everything he was doing instead of giving him space? What if Manny had never opened up to her by starting to leave his door open or hugging her when he came home from school?

Have a discussion about how powerful our actions can be in either building love and trust—or undermining them.

### The Bricks: What Manny and Melba Did to Build Their Love (in the order they appear in the story)

#### Melba’s Bricks

First meeting: happy face, full of excitement  
Asked if they wanted something to eat  
Didn’t force Manny to eat  
Gave him his space  
Checked in on him (re: homework)  
Was consistent in her attention  
Didn’t overreact when he tested her by stealing change

#### Manny’s Bricks

Began to answer “yes”  
Started leaving his door open  
Started talking with her  
Started to hug her

#### Melba’s Bricks

Planned special event for his birthday  
Got him a present

#### Manny’s Bricks

“Opened up a lot more”  
Started conversations  
Let himself get closer to her family

#### Melba’s Bricks

Let him know that she wanted to adopt him (but didn’t pressure)