



# Tips for Teachers

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

November 2003

## Writing Contest

Encourage your students to enter this month's Writing Contest, which offers \$175 in prizes, p. 2:

**“What is your vision of a perfect world? Describe.”**

This is a good opportunity to talk with students about the importance of *focus* in writing.

There's obviously no way to fully describe a perfect world in one or two pages, or even in an encyclopedia. The task for this essay is to home in on one thing that would make their world “perfect.” For example, being in love with the “perfect” person, getting into the college of your choice, getting respect and attention from your parents, mastering an extremely difficult challenge—all of these can make us feel like our world is “perfect,” at least for a short time. Essays with this kind of focus will probably be more interesting than a laundry list of items like, “no poverty, no crime, an Xbox in every living room and a Hummer in every driveway” (though students can write that kind of essay too, if they like).

You might begin this assignment by asking students to imagine one thing that would make their life “perfect,” (such as the items above, or winning Lotto, for example) and then ask them to make a list of all the ways their life (and those of others) would be better if that thing happened.

**Deadline:**

**November 14, 2003**

## What Causes You Stress? How Do You Relieve It?

**Intro:** Most teenagers feel like they are under lots of stress. They take care of siblings, study for tests, go on dates (or stress about not going on dates), worry about college or careers (or just graduating from high school). And they face many of the same daily stresses that all New Yorkers face: rude store clerks, rowdy kids in the subway, unsafe neighborhoods, not having enough time or money. On top of it all, they're trying to separate from their parents while also needing lots of love and support. Furthermore, they get little or no help in learning ways to cope with stress and loosen its grip.

In this issue, teens on our staff write about how they cope with stress. Their stories, on pages 8-9, include more than a score of creative strategies for dealing with stress, including deep breathing, taking a shower, talking to mom, writing stories, dancing, listening to music, thinking about people who have it even worse than they do, and playing handball.

### Discussion and Writing Lesson on Stress

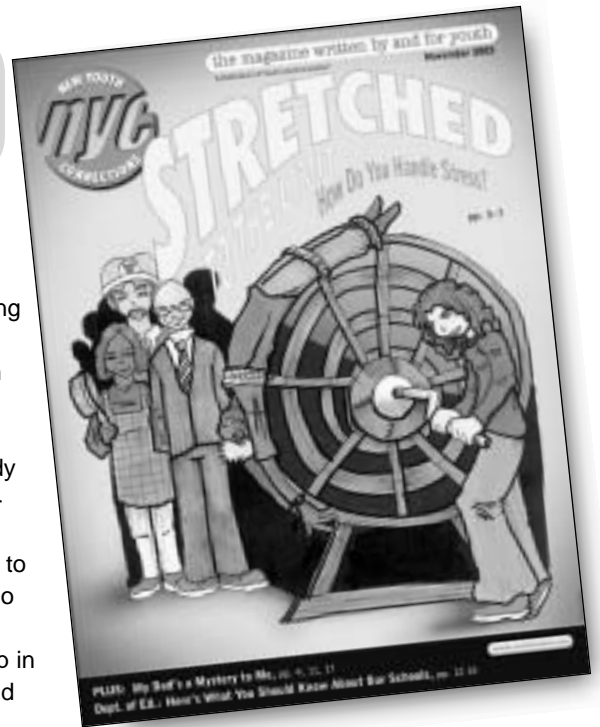
There are 8 stories on stress on pages 8-9. Assign students to read the stories individually, and then to meet in small groups to talk about their story. (You might want to assign the stories by A. Nyxs and P. Ramirez to one group, since they're both short.)

**List:** 5-10 min: Tell each group to make two lists on a sheet of paper. One

list is the things that cause the writer to feel stress. The second is what the writer does to relieve stress. They should make their lists as long as possible. If the writer mentions two songs she listens to, don't just write “listen to music.” List both songs.

**Discussion:** 10 min: Have each group report their lists to the whole class. (If it's convenient, write each group's list on the board as they report them.) When everyone has reported, ask which writer mentioned the most things that cause stress. Ask which writer listed the most ways he or she deals with stress. There will be a wide range, and it will be obvious that some stories are much richer in details than others.

**Discussion:** 5 min: Now, ask the students to “shout out” some of the things



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[www.youthcomm.org](http://www.youthcomm.org)



it after hearing how all the other kids deal with stress).

Pick one of the stories to give them an example before they start writing. Caitlin Lemmos' piece is a good one. Briefly note that she mentions punching doors, listening to music,

writing, and deep breathing. The only stressful incident she describes is her grandfather's death, but we still get a good picture of Caitlin as a high-strung, moody girl who has found lots of creative ways to calm down.

Tell you students that you want them to include as much detail as possible about what makes them stressed and how the deal with it, as Caitlin did.

Collect the essays. They will give you insight into what pressures your students are confronting and their skills in coping with those pressures.

*Optional:* Read the essays and note two things in each essay that the each student can expand on. Return the essays and tell them they will be graded on the second draft, not the first. Ask them to rewrite the essays for homework.

that make them feel stressed. Then ask them to shout out some of the things they do to relieve stress.

By now, the room has been filled with dozens of things that cause and relieve stress, which is a rich base for a short writing assignment.

Writing: 15-20 min: Tell the students that they must each write a short essay describing at least two things that cause them stress, and at least two ways they deal with it (or would consider dealing with

## The Timeline Essay

Teanisha Liverpool wrote a lively piece in the form of a mini-timeline detailing how she dealt with backstage nervousness before a dance performance: "If Y'all Mess Up, Just Keep on Going" page 24.

Tell your students they need to create a timeline for an event they participated in. It could be a performance, a party, a trip into Manhattan, a date, something tragic, or humorous, or embarrassing. The most important thing is that they are able to break it down into about 8 to 10 specific segments, in which something different happened at each moment. Ideally there will also be some tension in the story, such as anxiety about how they will perform or what will happen.

This writing assignment is designed to show students, in a very concrete way, that a large topic can be broken down into many smaller topics. Attacking each smaller topic, one at a time, can make writing an essay seem less overwhelming. In this instance, each segment will be just 1-3 paragraphs long, but by the time they've completed each segment the students will have a substantial essay.

Begin by asking students to write down a couple of ideas they *might* write about. (Tell them they won't have to choose a final topic until later.) Performance is an obvious source of ideas. But tell them that a seemingly boring event, like waiting for a bus on Halloween and worrying about whether you'll get home without being egged, can be just as interesting as a description of a huge Sweet 16 party.

After students write down some topics in their notebooks, ask them to read some of their ideas aloud. This will get everyone thinking of more ideas.

**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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Then, tell them you're going to read a story of the kind they will write, as an example. Before you begin reading, tell the students that Teanisha uses several writing techniques to make her story interesting. (You can read these, or write them on the board, or put them on a sheet of paper and pass them out. Depending on the sophistication of students in your class, you may want to use more or less of them.) Here are some of the things she does:

—She doesn't telegraph (or give away) the outcome of the story. She moves the reader along from moment to moment. The timeline is a great device for this.

—She loses her grip then gets it back. She loses it again and recovers it. Life is like that. We all don't move forward all the time. Good stories can contain reversals and recoveries.

—She makes good use of dialogue.

—She writes about a near universal experience. We all have to perform sooner or later.

—She relies on verbs and nouns to tell her story, and uses very few adjectives or adverbs.

—There is some but not too much analysis and the analysis is simple and rings true: at the start she thinks performing used to be more fun in elementary school and in the end she realizes it's not

that different, an insight which she can carry with her to other challenges. She shows the reader the truth of this observation more than telling the reader about it.

—Remind your students: Good writing doesn't depend on describing earth shattering traumatic events that change your life completely. Some of the best writing is about daily life or events which mean a lot to the reader without changing her life forever.

Based on this list, tell the student that while you read they need to circle the following items: at least two examples of good dialogue; half a dozen vivid nouns or verbs that contribute to the story; two places where the writer faces an important challenge or possible screw-up; two examples of good description, where the reader can really "see" what is going on.

When you finish reading, go around the room and have students read aloud some of the examples they've circled.

Then, tell students to look at the list of ideas that you discussed at the beginning of class and to jot down any other ideas they've had during the discussion and reading. **They need to pick one for their essay.**

Give them 10 minutes to do two things: 1) Write two or three sentences about their topic, 2) Sketch a brief timeline showing some of the items they'll include in their essay. For example, if they're writ-

ing about taking the bus on Halloween, the draft timeline could be something like: 2:50 last class ends; 3:00 cross school yard; 3:05 get to bus stop and see boys with eggs across street; 3:15 bus still hasn't come; etc. etc.; 4:15 safe at home.

Students should hand in these drafts. You can mark them up with quick suggestions for more detail, questions, etc. After you return them, the students' assignment is to write an essay of 800-1,200 words, modeled after Teanisha's.

## How to Get to LaLa Land [An especially good story for Spark Counselors] page 16

The careless reader might think this piece condones smoking pot and you may have some careless readers in your class or group. The piece is actually a satire which holds up pot smokers to ridicule and scorn. But it's written in a sly style that mimics the self-delusion of many pot-heads, so they may find themselves nodding in agreement and skipping over the ridicule—not realizing that the writer is laughing *at* them, not with them.

So...before beginning this story, tell your students that the writer is (or was) a heavy pot smoker; her experience shows in her intimate knowledge of what it's like to be high and be around other pot heads. While her pot smoking may not be admirable, it's what gives her credibility. The key question to ask your students about this story is, How do you think *she* answers her final question, "To puff, or not to puff," and Why? What's the evidence? (The strongest lines in the story are at the bottom of the fourth column: "When you return from LaLa land, everything's not so dandy. When you come back you might feel depressed that the dog wasn't real and that your problems are still there, in a pile of rubble, unsolved.")

She tried to drown her problems in Mary J, but found that in the end smoking only deluded her and made her problems worse. If *you* tell your students that they likely won't listen. "Anonymous" may be more persuasive.

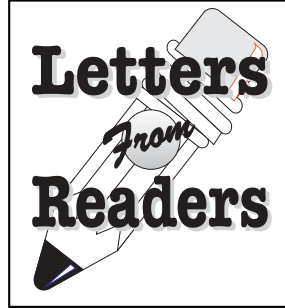


Fernando Quinones

# Two Quick Ways to Get Everyone Writing

## 1. Letters to the Editor

We welcome letters to the editor and publish as many as we can. This is an easy way to involve everyone in a short writing assignment (and they may get the satisfaction of seeing their names in print). Writing letters can be an ideal “Do Now” exercise after your students finish reading articles in *NYC*. Use these prompts to get your students started (a few sentences on one or more of these points will be sufficient for a letter):



“I liked/disliked the article because...”

“A point I really agree with in the article, based on my experience, is...”

“A point I really disagree with, based on my experience, is...”

“A solution to one of the problems in this article might be...”

An easy letter for this month would be one in which the writer describes how he or she deals with stress after reading the stories on pages 8-9. We’d love to run a page of teen readers’ experiences and suggestions on how to reduce stress.

See the letters from readers about Christina Gonzalez’s story, p. 22, for examples of good letters to the editor.

## 2. Essay for the Chancellor Tips for Teaching the Five-Paragraph Persuasive Essay

**Goal:** Introduce your students to the structure of the five-paragraph essay.

Use “Letters to the Chancellor” on pages 12-13, in which six young writers registered complaints about their schools in the form of letters to Joel Klein.

Tell your students they will need to complete one of the following statements in a five paragraph essay:

- The best thing about my education at this school is...
- The biggest challenges facing me at this school are...

Then have your students read the six letters with the idea that they will have to flesh out one of the above statements.

### Examples on the Board

If you do this as a class exercise, first ask the class to

give examples for each statement and write them on the board. The students writing about the “best thing” might focus on a particular teacher or counselor, a special class, an extra-curricular activity, or even a social aspect of the school that is especially important to them. Students writing about the challenges will find many ideas in letters to Chancellor Klein: overcrowding, stressed staff, not enough electives and afterschool programs, or even attitudes and actions of peers.

After reading the letters, ask students to look again at the lists you’ve compiled on the board. Do they want to add “best things” or “challenges” now that they’ve read the letters?

### Evidence

Then, select a few of the statements on the board and ask the students to come up with evidence or examples that support their points. If a “best thing” is a favorite teacher, they should say a few things about what makes that teacher effective. If a “challenge” is the lack of electives, they should list the classes they’d take if they had the chance.

### Writing

In writing the essay they should follow the classic five-part persuasive structure:

*Paragraph I:* Opening statement of opinion. This should be more than just a rehash of “Schools are doing a good job.” Urge them to think of a sentence which grabs the reader’s attention: “If it weren’t for my English teacher I wouldn’t be thinking about going to college.” Or alternatively, “I’ve been trying to meet with my college counselor for six weeks and can’t get an appointment.”

*Paragraphs II, III and IV:* Each paragraph focuses on one reason that supports the statement. For example, if one paragraph brings up overworked teachers, then the writer should provide a specific example: “Ms. Johnson has to counsel over 400 students about going to college.”

**NOTE:** As you make this point you may tell your class that letter writers make effective points because of the concrete evidence they present. They’re not just whining. For example, Amy Lu backs up her gripe about the lack of electives in small schools by contrasting her school’s language offerings (only Spanish available) with her friends’ experiences at larger schools. Janill Briones does not simply say there are too many kids at her school. She presents the consequences: she can’t take gym even though she needs phys. ed. credits to graduate.

*Paragraph V:* This paragraph restates the opinion and summarizes the reasons.

If possible, please send us copies of the best essays. The Chancellor needs to hear more from students.