



DONNA MARIE TODD

THE SINGER OF STORIES

828.407-6023 [www.donnamarietodd.com](http://www.donnamarietodd.com)

## Juicing Up Creative Writing Skills in Upper Elementary and Middle School Students

One of the things I hear over and over again from teachers and administrators in middle schools is that the drudgery of the mandated testing that all kids and faculty must endure has had a negative impact on students' creative abilities, especially as it pertains to writing.

I think this is very understandable from everyone's point of view. Middle students' minds are still immature, so they see everything rather literally. When it comes to writing, if grammar and sentence structure are how their writing is assessed, we shouldn't be surprised that they exclude creativity from that process. We shouldn't be surprised that they assume creativity has no value when it receives no reward in grading.

A lack of creativity can't be solved by giving it a little pat on the back. Saying, "and make sure it's creative" won't change anything when they don't have skill sets in creativity. If you didn't have a blueprint or hammer and nails could you really build a dream house?

Creative students have real tools and real skills for creativity. While it is true that some people are naturally more creative than others, creative process skills can be learned and applied to math and science almost as easily as writing!

### REACH AIG AND INCLUSIONAL STUDENTS

In the realm of creative process, the playing field is leveled, especially in grades 4-6. Inclusional students comment that they have experienced their first taste of academic success during the creative process exercises. Gifted peers are often surprised and sometimes challenged by other students' adeptness at visualization, oral recall and associative reasoning. While this may sound surprising, many inclusional students come from families of origin that are primarily oral, if not functionally illiterate. When the visualization of a creative thought is how you win the game, their oral background and ability to "see" what is being described becomes an asset, sometimes for the very first time.

### REDUCE STRESS AND HAVE SOME FUN

You can reduce the stress that frequently accompanies learning by emphasizing participation in the creative process instead of perfection in a finished product. Tell the students that the **ONLY** expectation for that class period is that they will participate appropriately.

A great way to get started in the process of creative writing (while practicing those annoying parts of speech) is to play my fast-paced game called "Build a Silly Sentence©." In this game (the playing pieces appear on the last page for you to use, free of charge) students write sentences, that are outrageous. Ask the students to recite the project's objectives: "All sentences must be **absolutely** and **completely silly and outrageous!**" I find this works best when you pretend you can't hear them very well and make them repeat it again and again until they are shouting! Get all that silly energy out ahead of the game!

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Level the playing field by serving as the scribe for the class. You divide the class into four teams: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and provide the game pieces for each team. (Teachers - the game pieces are on the last page of this article.)

You'll start each sentence by saying something like, "There once was a..." and then calling on one team after another to provide the adjectives, then the noun, then the verb and adverb. So the sentence the students create may look like this: "There once was a **fat, blue horse** that **jumped clumsily** into the **yellow river**." (Team words are in red.)

Ask the students to judge the sentence based on the objectives they repeated to you. Is it silly? Is it outrageous? The more they relax, the more they will learn. The faster the game goes, the more the parts of speech are embedded deep in their memory because it's exciting! Our brains release serotonin when we experience excitement and pleasure. But classroom stress and an emphasis on grading have a negative impact on students' learning and inhibits creativity. Here's what the Franklin Institute has to say (<http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/stress.html>):

"As science gains greater insight into the consequences of stress on the brain, the picture that emerges is not a pretty one. A chronic overreaction to stress overloads the brain with powerful hormones that are intended only for short-term duty in emergency situations. Their cumulative effect damages and kills brain cells."

Ooops. We don't need any dead brain cells at middle school - right? Games are a great way to diffuse

the stress. Laughter opens neural pathways and builds connective brain response, it's a great teaching assistant!

### WHY MAKE IT FUN?

Johns Hopkins biostatistics professor Ron Berk uses humor to enhance otherwise dull statistical methodology by tapping into students' multiple intelligences and learning styles in a way that forces them to think in divergent and real-life ways. "When I enter the classroom, I want to change the entire atmosphere into one where everyone has fun with the material--even if the material is complex," says Berk, author of "Professors are from Mars, Students are from Snickers." "It helps relieve fear and reduce anxiety." (Stylus Publishing, 2003) and "Humor as an Instructional Defibrillator: Evidence-Based Techniques in Teaching and Assessment" (Stylus Publishing, 2002).

Skill set games, like my "Build a Silly Sentence©" are great ways to employ humor in learning.

Did you know that research says you transfer the stress you may have from your job or home life to your students? It's true! Our brains are wired to both search for and react to another's stress levels. It's an ancient survival mechanism. When we feel stress emanating from another, our ancient reptilian brain takes over and we think about fight or flight, not sentence structure!

During my teaching artist residencies, I use intentional breath work to diffuse any tension I may have brought with me to the classroom. One of the best is the 4-7-8 relaxation breath technique taught at heart rehabilitation centers. It's easy to do and highly effective. You count while you breathe as follows: Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 7 counts and exhale on 8 counts. This relaxes your body's autonomic, parasympathetic nervous system.

Sometimes students need help to expand their awareness of what is possible. Especially now. Do you find that the "digital generation" tends to start at the end? Google® has encouraged us to think all answers are available at the click of a button! Creative process involves deep thinking, not button clicking or easy answers!

To help their writing, encourage your students to see their own story so that they can then tell the reader about it using rich descriptive language. In addition to games that engage their playfulness with words (i.e. "Build a Silly Sentence") employ creative teams whenever possible to increase participation. Here's an example of a team activity:

### Setting Maps

Instead of allowing students to describe a setting in a few words, ask them to draw a setting map on a sheet of paper. This engages multiple intelligences and is an especially effective process with teams. The verbal students provide descriptions, the spatially gifted do the drawing and the mathematically advantaged check for proper proportions of objects on the map.

### ENCOURAGE "WHY?" QUESTIONS

Why" and "then what" questions help students engage more deeply in their own creative process and prepare them to extend that process to other aspects of their academics. Both questions are used in mathematical and scientific endeavors, especially at the higher levels.

*If funding is available, I'd enjoy working with you to develop your students' creative potential! My teaching residencies are customized to fit your schedule, academic goals and student demographics.*

VERB TEAM GAME PIECES

ran walked talked said went  
laughed sang cried spun  
leaped sat crawled spat eyed  
strutted pranced kicked  
pulled pushed tied cut

NOUN TEAM GAME PIECES

pony chicken boy man  
girl woman fish bird  
alien dog cat zebra horse  
polar bear baseball player  
gymnast swimmer runner

ADJECTIVE TEAM GAME PIECES

pretty funny blue yellow red  
round tall fat skinny old  
green outrageous mean tiny  
angry sad perfect lopsided  
wild dedicated loyal picky

ADVERB TEAM GAME PIECES

hard fast slowly carefully lustily  
encouragingly thoughtfully ruefully  
frenetically quickly happily sadly  
wildly daringly proudly unhappily  
energetically angrily harshly