

Wolfgang Butzkamm

Story beginnings. A writing activity for intermediate and advanced classes.

NOTES FOR THE TEACHER

Objectives

Students get practice in composing prose passages and developing narrative skills. They have to choose their own words and expressions and arrange them for a vivid story

Topic

„Write a short account of a dream you remember vividly.“ „Write a short account of a supernatural event that happened to you.“ Such straightforward writing assignments are less stimulating than the introductory sentences listed below. The pupils have a range of ideas to choose from, and they have something to start out with. It is hoped that the narration beginnings will draw out interesting responses, and will yield real tales of the imagination from some students at least.

Suggested treatment

Step 1

Warming up / pre-writing activity

Before putting pen to paper, start your lesson with warming-up techniques suggested by Eie Ericsson, for instance „buzz reading“. This means you get all your students to read some well-known text aloud at the same time at individual speeds. Two pages will do. They have a fair chance to warm up their mouths. The text is familiar (no pronunciation problems!) and is used as a kind of linguistic jogging path. Those students who are disturbed by the noise of their peers may cover their ears. It is a time-honoured technique used in synagogues for over three thousand years. - This intense activity provides a good contrast to the bulk of the lesson where students will work silently at their desks.

Step 2

Introducing the writing assignment

Present your narration beginnings (worksheet 1) on the OHP or write them up on the chalkboard. Go through the list and only give one or two solutions as samples from university students of English.- Tell them they can do as well or even better.

Tell them that any idea is appropriate. "Just use your imagination“. The entire composition can be one big fabrication or can be based on something they experienced themselves or read about. - This should be enough to get them started.

Step 3

Story-writing and publication

The students start writing, and as they develop their drafts the teacher should work as an assistant on the side lines. Also, both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries should be available for students to consult on their own or together with their teacher

Volunteers will read out their texts to the class. Give plenty of praise. Show that you appreciate the work they have done and their readiness to present their work to the class. Generally, there is no problem persuading students to share their writing with classmates. In fact every student who has worked hard for 35 minutes would prefer some form of acknowledgement from his / her teacher. The obvious solution to the problem is a notice-board in the classroom. Students are invited to put their texts up on the notice-board for all to see and read.

However, ideally, the published products should be error-free. This could at least partly be achieved through peer editing. Other pupils can spot and correct errors in their partner's paragraphs before they are pinned to the board.

Homework

Ask the students to come up with their own story beginnings. Here is a list of further examples:

- When I was playing at home alone with my doll, I suddenly became smaller and smaller ...
- Always when I cross two fingers on my left hand I become extra strong on my right one ...
- "Sit on my back," said my budgie, "and come fly with me..."
- Once my toy car became bigger and bigger ...
- When I was huge / a giant, I simply took ...
- "Hey," whispered the rabbit, "come with me..."
- "Roarr," bellowed the tiger, "we want to be friends." I found that really good ...
- Together with my friend I can jump over houses. Yesterday ...
- My air bed can fly ...
- My bed has big tyres, a propeller, and it can swim ...
- I once had a bouncing ball with which I could ...
- And it came to pass that...

Worksheet:
Story Beginnings

1. **When I had eaten the apple, I could suddenly ...**
2. **I only have to lie in bed and blink three times with the left eye, then ...**
3. **As we lay in bed together, my teddy started whispering ...**
4. **When I was alone on the island ...**
5. **Once I was invisible ...**
6. **Something knocked from inside my toy cupboard and a voice said:
"Let me out of here..."**
7. **We have a teacher. When he is happy, flowers grow on his head ...**
8. **I have rebuilt my old kettcar. With it I can now ...**
9. **Once I closed my eyes and I found myself in a world...**
10. **The last thing I clearly remember was...**

Solutions

(I thank my students who produced these texts in the summer term of 1997)

1. When I had eaten the apple, I could suddenly...

When I had eaten the apple, I could suddenly feel that something strange was happening to me. A weird old lady had walked up to me on the street while I was shopping and had given me this apple. At first I was very confused, because she disappeared all of a sudden. In the afternoon I went back home again. I sat down in my garden. I was alone. I had been alone for one year now. I got divorced and it was very hard for me to get over this. I couldn't go out with my friends any more and therefore lost most of them. As every day I was sitting at home, all by myself. But it was a sunny day. I lay down in the grass and the sun tickled my nose. It wasn't really bad, but I was alone. I thought about the old woman and remembered the apple she had given me. I took it out of my pocket and bit into it and then this strange thing happened to me. I was lying in the grass, when suddenly an ant walked up to me and said: "Hey, you're destroying our house!" It was crazy! I could converse with animals! Suddenly I wasn't alone any more. I had found friends. Maybe angels do exist. My dog became my best friend and I am happy now.

When I had eaten the apple, I could suddenly understand animals talking which I thought was great in the beginning. My dog told me that this apple had come from a magical tree which had been bewitched by a mighty magician. Then my dog started complaining about the fact that I did not take him out often enough and that he thought I was a very lazy person. I went away and met our neighbour's cat who told me that she thought that I was nasty, because I would pull her tail from time to time just to tease her. My brother's goldfish complained that I would change the water in his glass too seldom and that he was absolutely sick of me. I started to feel a bit annoyed, as every animal only criticised me which I thought was unjust. Hadn't I been nice to them often enough? I had given them food and water. The magical apple started to annoy me completely, when I suddenly heard a shrill whisper all around me - obviously my eating the apple had more and more effect. I could hear the birds complaining that the summer had been too cold, the worms complaining that the wooden stairs were too mouldy - every animal seemed to complain! Finally I went back into the forest where the bewitched tree stood and found another tree with pears right next to it. I ate one of them and luckily what I had hoped for really happened: I could not hear the animals talking any longer.

When I had eaten the apple, I could suddenly feel a pain in my stomach. I went to my mother to ask for help. She told me to lie down on the bed and went to the kitchen. Three minutes later she came back and put a hot water bottle on my stomach. I felt really comfortable. Then my mother sat down on my bed and began to tell me a nice fairy-tale - actually it was my favourite one. I must have fallen asleep while she was telling the story, because when I woke up I was alone, the hot water bottle was nearly cold and I didn't feel any pain any more.

When I had eaten the apple, I could suddenly see that the other fruit in our fruit basket had faces with eyes, noses and mouths. The banana, the apple, the orange and the strawberries came to life. They were talking to each other and I was able to understand what they said. I just couldn't believe my eyes. Then, suddenly, one of those living, curious fruits started to talk to me. It was the apple, a really good-looking one - the green colour, the size - it looked just delicious. "Hey, you, big monster, yes, you, why did you eat my friend?"

2. I only have to lie in bed and blink three times with the left eye, then...

I only have to lie in bed and blink three times with the left eye, then I can leave my body and set out on interesting journeys not only all around the world but also - since I'm also invisible - into every house and to every place I wish to see. This is really great, and after having been to almost every foreign country, it becomes more and more attractive to stay in my own hometown and pay visits to my friends or even to people I don't like or simply don't know. What's really funny about it is that I can watch them and listen in on them, even talk to them, since they can hear my voice, yet never see me. It's a bit like mind-reading. Though I can't hear what people are thinking, it is really astonishing how differently people will behave when they are by themselves or, at least, do not play the part they usually play when they are with others. For example I went to see my teacher a couple of times. It's not that I don't like him, it's just that he is such a correct and serious-minded person when he's in class. I have hardly ever seen him smile, let alone laugh. He's nice though, but very distant. He has never referred to anything regarding his private life and that's what got me interested in his secret private life.

3. As we lay in bed together, my teddy started whispering...

As we lay in bed together, my teddy started whispering. "You know what?!" he said. "Last week I met a nice teddy girl and she invited me to a party tonight. You wanna come?" I was wide awake in seconds. Of course I did! A teddy party! All my friends would be so jealous! So I grabbed my jumper and followed him through the door. We sneaked down the stairs... "Mind the third step", I hastened to say. "It squeaks." Teddy made a big jump to avoid the squeaking step; but then he stumbled and rolled down the stairs. It looked so funny that I had to giggle. I know he didn't hurt himself, he was so soft and comfy. That's one thing I love about him: You can bounce him all over the place and he never feels any pain. Anyway, Teddy was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. "Hurry up!" he shouted. "We'll be late!" - "I'm coming, don't worry!" Why on earth are teddies always in a hurry? I can't remember where we went because it was quite far away. The town lay in complete silence and the only living things we met were a bunch of bats. Teddy invited them to come along, but they preferred a pizza- and video-night with their friends! Incredible! Well, never mind. We finally arrived at a huge dark castle in the middle of nowhere. Teddy rang the bell and we could hear the sound echoing through the hall. For a while, there was complete silence, but footsteps approached and the

door opened with an unbearable squeaking. A cute little teddy girl peeped her head out of the door. "Llanfiollwer!" she squeaked. "I thought you wouldn't come!" I never knew Teddy had a name and such an unpronounceable one at that...

As we lay in bed together, my teddy started whispering. At first I didn't realise that it was Dodo, my teddy, since it was dark in the room and I was supposed to be asleep. After a little while, curiosity became stronger than fear and I hesitantly switched on the light. Dodo was sitting on my bed with a very lively expression on his face. Never before had I seen him like this. He was totally upset. Something terrible must have happened in his bear-life, I thought...

4. When I was alone on the island,...

When I was alone on the island, all of a sudden this weird-looking fellow appeared in front of me. His body seemed to consist of nothing more than the impenetrable mist that surrounded me and hid the shape of the island from my view. The stranger's voice was thin, but high-pitched and he said: "What are you up to, manling?" Apparently I was not able to hide the nature of my occupation prior to his arrival, because the pick and spade were lying close to the pit I had dug. This pit was by now some four feet in diameter and approximately six feet deep, but I had not even found the slightest clue to where the treasure chest had been buried by the pirates all those centuries ago. The stranger asked me again: "What are you up to, manling?" By the time I was about to answer, a pair of strong arms got hold of me and I was dragged deeper into the mist and the jungle that opened itself up to swallow me. And I heard: "Next time you should be cleverer than that. If there will be a next time. Hahaha..."

5. Once I was invisible...

Once I was invisible and I could go everywhere without being seen. It was quite funny. I went to school, for example, and the teacher thought I wasn't there, but I was and I had a lot of fun hiding other people's things and playing tricks on them. But suddenly, just when I was hiding all pieces of chalk, I became visible again. The teacher and all the pupils were shocked and began to scream terribly. In order to calm them down, I pretended I had hidden behind the curtains all the time. The teacher got very angry with me and I hope that I will never become invisible again.

6. Something knocked from inside my toy cupboard and a voice said: "Let me out of here..."

Something knocked from inside my toy cupboard and a voice said: "Let me out of here..." I was sitting at the table, doing my homework for the following day and trying to come up with the right answers for the maths exercises, when my little doll "Hanna" - the name I gave her - started crying. First I wondered what it was and who was crying, but from the sound of the voice I gathered it had to be Hanna. I had

always imagined this kind of voice for her, very high and clear, so I was not really very astonished to hear it. I went to the cupboard and took her out from between the teddies and the other little things I used to play with, gathered her in my arms and kissed her, the way my mother kissed my baby sister when she cried. I asked her: "What's the matter with you?" and she told me that she hated to stay in the cupboard when I was busy and that she loved to sit by my side and feel my arms around her. The main thing was - and I have just become aware of it - that I was not astonished about her ability to talk to me. It was so real and I didn't stop to ask myself why she could talk at all. I think it was a kind of a natural process: I had been talking to her and had received imagined answers from her for years.

7. We have a teacher. When he is happy, flowers grow on his head...

We have a teacher. When he is happy, flowers grow on his head - something all pupils in our class like very much. The flowers are various colours and very beautiful to look at. The room is filled with nice scents. There is only one problem: when our teacher gets annoyed or even angry about someone or something, all the flowers die immediately. But that's not all: as soon as the flowers have died, they turn into monstrous, ugly plants which look as if their favourite food is little children! So all the pupils thought about a way to do something to stop this. Being nice all the time was not the preferred solution. So we decided to water the flowers before they could wither away...

8. I have rebuilt my old kettcar. With it I can now...

I have rebuilt my old kettcar. With it I can now drive through the old streets I know from my youth. I can catch the wind while I'm moving. I can have a look to the right at the place where we used to play. I can have a look to the left at the house where I used to live. And I can take... Oops! Drove through a turd. Not much fun for my mum. So I take my old bicycle. I remember the feeling when I first rode it without any help. It was a wonderful feeling that floated through my whole body. I could go wherever I wanted to. Unfortunately I bumped into a car. Hey, why do my memories always have a bad ending?

9. Once I closed my eyes and I found myself in a world...

Once I closed my eyes and I found myself in a world that seemed different to the world I know. Supposing it was a daydream, I opened my eyes and wondered where I could be. I was lying under a big oak tree that spread its green arms all over me. Close to me, a little opening let in the warming rays of the sun. I stood up slowly, listening to the birds singing and the wind gently whispering into my ears. No... Well, yes, there were voices, softly and silently forming words and apparently addressing me, calling me by a strange name that wasn't mine, but still everything seemed familiar. "Go to the mountain of wisdom", they said. "Seek out the dragon and find the answers..." I was struck with amazement at this unbelievable scene.

Obviously I had been carried into a forest, but it was an enchanted forest, for what appeared in front of me was a marvellous creature, right out of a fairy-tale. A unicorn, white as a diamond, was slowly closing in on me, and I just knew I had to move on up and touch it. "Don't be afraid", I heard it say. "I will take you wherever you need to go." Shortly after, without a moment's thought, me and my unicorned companion were flying over the endless forest paths, leaving behind every doubt if this was really happening. "So where do you want to go?" the unicorn asked in a soft voice. "The wind told me to search for the dragon on the mountain of wisdom", I replied. "So be it." In a glimpse, the picture changed and we were closing in on a big, greyish mountain...

10. The last thing I clearly remember was...

The last thing I clearly remember was the taste of vodka accompanied by the sound of breaking glass - just before I hit the floor. The last thing I thought was "Nice carpet" - then I passed out. When I woke up again, I was close to "drowning", lying face down in a pool of mud. While standing up and wiping the dirt out of my eyes, I heard strange sounds, something like a hammer being smashed against steel bars. As my vision got clearer, I wished it hadn't - a huge, green-greyish hairy creature was approaching, swinging a flail and trying to play baseball with my head. So I did the most logical thing that one can do in such an everyday situation - I ran away as fast as hell. Unfortunately I ain't that good a runner. Try to imagine a person who stumbles at the first opportunity - I'm the one who will stumble even before that person. So when I hit the dirt (the second time!) I started rolling around like a pig, just to stay out of range of my pursuer's weapon.

Christina used this idea in the *Höhere Handelsschule*, class 11 (16- to 18-year-olds). She set a time limit of 25 minutes and instructed the class to work together in groups of 2 or 3 and invent a story, using a given story opening. Here are three uncorrected specimens produced by her pupils:

Last night I was invisible for two hours and I prepared to rob a Bank. Then I went to the Bank. After this I took my pumpgun and shot the door. Then the alarm bell started to ring. After a few minutes the police arrived. Slowly I took all the money in a bag under my shirt. And went out. Then I went to McDonald's and ate a Fish Mac. Then I went home. In the morning when I was normal again, I booked a plane to L.A. to have 6 nice weeks. In the sunshine, without problems. After this journey my money was out, and now I have to work again.

When I was alone on Spooky Island some strange things happened there. One morning I got up and heard some noises. I was scared and wanted to look what was happening. But I didn't find anything. In the evening I heard the noise again. And

then I saw something, but it was only a shadow. In that moment, I wasn't able to move and I shivered. The moon was full and suddenly I heard a scream. And then I began to run. Faster and faster and then I stopped running. I turned back and realised that I didn't move. I was exactly on the place I had been before I started to run. I looked forward again and saw a monster. Then I woke up and realised that it was only a dream.

Once my computer grew bigger and bigger and it didn't want to stop. At first I didn't know what happened. I tried to switch off my computer. But it was too late. The table broke down and the computer was as big as a car. The monitor switched on and the computer began to talk to me. It said that it is alive and it needed more energy to rule the world. I had an idea. I ran to the plug and pulled it out. The computer began to get smaller and smaller. Then I took a hammer and hit the computer. That was the end of the computer.