

Wolfgang Butzkamm

Sentence Openings - a writing activity for intermediate and advanced classes

Notes for the Teacher

Objectives

to give students practice in composing prose passages

to give students an opportunity to write about themselves and analyse themselves, their beliefs and ideas.

Topic

The students get the opportunity to tell something of themselves and to reflect about ideas that concern them. Generally speaking, no topic attracts teenagers more than the topic of themselves. If students freeze at the thought of filling an empty page with something of their own invention, the sentence openings can help them to overcome an initial barrier and spark off ideas that they can put to paper. Also, there are quite different options to choose from. That way you will probably get some interesting and honest writing samples from most of your pupils.

Suggested Treatment

Step 1

Introducing the writing assignment

“Today I’d like you to do some writing. Everybody will find something to write because you are going to write something about yourselves. Things that have happened to you and have perhaps left a lasting impression on you. Remember: Examining the past is a way of preparing the future. Or perhaps write about ideas you once found important or still think important. Or perhaps write about regrets you may have or things you may want to change in your life. So you have a choice which will make it easy for you to think of something. That’s why I have provided you with a list of sentences with which you should start out. It is a sort of track which you can follow. (Teacher hands out **worksheet**).

This sheet contains sentence openings from which you should pick one or two that, hopefully, give you an impulse to write. You can also call these incomplete statements „sentence stems“ or „sentence stubs“ (like cigarette stubs). To give you just one example. Let’s take no. 11. It says here: What disturbs me most is that... Now let’s see what a former student actually wrote... (**solutions**). Go over the list carefully before you make up your mind and start writing. Please take pains to write legibly because some of your finished products could be pinned up on the notice-board for everybody to read.”

Step 2

Writing. Silent work

Both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries should be available for the learners to consult on their own or with the teacher’s help. Note that the teacher takes on different roles at different stages in the writing cycle. While the students are writing, s/he acts as an assistant who helps out with unknown words and expressions. When students read out their texts, s/he is part of the audience and enjoys the stories. Later, s/he is an evaluator who responds to the ideas and comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the texts. And finally, if necessary, s/he can take on the role of examiner who gives grades for the work produced.

Step 3

Discussion and publication of texts

Volunteers will read out their texts to the class. Or perhaps the teacher has noticed which of the pupils has produced a good piece of writing and will call on them to present their texts. Have a whole-class discussion on the problems addressed in these texts.

Finally, invite pupils to put their texts up on the classroom notice-board for all to see and read.

Homework

Each student is to find two more sentence openings that could stimulate people to write something. Here are some more sentence openings:

- I have since realised that...
- I have never forgiven him/her for...
- I have never been sure whether...
- I am really fed up with...
- Considering all circumstances, it is perhaps best to tell you all...
- It would be a fantastic idea to...
- I have always asked myself if...
- I know things will change as soon as...
- I have not yet understood (how, what, why)...
- My most burning desire is to...
- Next time I have an opportunity to..., I'll...
- If I could turn back the clock, I'd...
- What I still can't get over is (the fact that)...
- On the night before my (tenth) birthday I decided to...
- I never thought the day would come when...
- If there is one thing I'd like to do it's...
- What I always dream of is...
- What I always wanted to tell you about myself is...

Worksheet

1. My earliest memory is of a (boat).
2. I shall never forget the day on which...
3. If I have a single regret, it's that...
4. I have often thought of (writing a book).
5. I have long suspected that...
6. I am constantly being told that...
7. The older I get the more I realise that...
8. I shudder to think of what may happen when...
9. The trouble with our (maths) teacher is...
10. What I can't accept is the idea that...
11. What disturbs me most is that...
12. Wouldn't it be great if...

Solutions

(I thank my students for writing these texts in the summer term of 1997)

1. My earliest memory is of...

My earliest memory is of the death of my younger brother. He died when he was only 19 months old from something which is called "sudden child-death" and which isn't yet completely understood by the doctors. Although I was only about two years old when this happened I remember the whole day very well.

My earliest memory is of a tree. It was a very old one (a willow, I believe) and it stood in a park near my home in Bergen op Zoom. At the weekend my family would take a walk through the park, climb up a few steps and inevitably reach this old tree. One could easily sit down on one of the branches and gently rock as if it were a cradle or a hammock. One day we were told that swinging on this tree's branches wasn't at all good and naturally we stopped doing it. I don't like walking anymore.

My earliest memory is of a summer garden. I remember my grandparents drinking tea in the shadow of the old oak tree I liked so much, the birds chirping in the trees and, what interested me most, was the orange and blue plastic swimming-pool we used to fill with water. In my mind I can still see my sister in her bathing-suit jumping into the water. Having a great time with our family and friends, we forgot everything around us.

My earliest memory is of my grandfather lying in his bed dying. It was at my grandparents' flat. My mother cut the nails on grandad's feet. I stood next to her, watching them, fascinated. In my hand I held a thick slice of fresh dark bread, covered with homemade strawberry jam which I loved. It was very peaceful and I was not frightened.

2. I shall never forget the day on which...

I shall never forget the day on which I came home and saw our house on fire. It was about ten o'clock in the evening when I returned from a party and I was in a very good mood because I had had a lot of fun. When I saw our house I got a shock and at first I couldn't believe what I saw.

I shall never forget the day on which my baby brother was born. It was a fine day in early March. My mother had had contractions all night long and at 7.30 in the morning she felt it was about time to go to hospital. After having just entered the maternity ward, my mother gave birth to my brother at 9.00 AM.

I shall never forget the day when on which I went to Australia for six months. I left Frankfurt at about 9 o'clock in the evening and had a flight of about 16 hours. I was really sad leaving my mother and my friends behind and at the same time very curious about the country on the other side of the world. It was a mixture of sadness and nervousness due to curiosity. During the last 4 years at school I had always thought of travelling to Australia one day and this wish was so strong that I went there directly after the "Abitur". However, during the last few days before my departure I began to feel nervous and unsure about my plans. The distance was so enormous, I was just 19 years old and did not have any real plans except travelling around...

I shall never forget the day on which I got spooked. I was standing in front of the stove in a big house in California preparing a meal. Suddenly I froze, not because of the cold

weather, but because I felt I was being watched. It was already dark and I hadn't pulled down the blinds yet. Somebody or something had its eyes on me. I could feel the stare. I got so scared that I switched off the stove, took my keys and left the house... Nobody, of course, had been there, at least I didn't see anyone, but I know there was something that touched my soul... Was it just inside my head or was there perhaps somebody who had watched me from outside the window? I still don't know. The strange thing was that a few days before I had found imploded glass in my bathroom and a broken glass plate...

3. If I have a single regret, it's that...

If I have a single regret, it's that I wasn't allowed to go to school any longer when I was sixteen. I have often blamed my parents for not giving me the chance to do what I thought was right for me. On the other hand I think that what I experienced after their decision has become a part of me that I wouldn't want to have missed.

4. I have often thought of...

I have often thought of the day when I will start fitness-training. But the truth is that I am too lazy. The day will never come and all resolutions are taken in vain.

I have often thought of leaving the country and starting a new life in America or Australia. I think it would be a more interesting and exciting life with meeting new people and starting a new job. But on the other hand, I'm afraid it wouldn't take long before I was homesick.

I have often thought of travelling around the world in order to see a lot of different countries, just to be free to go anywhere and to spend some time wherever you'd like to. When you'd seen enough, you could just move on. Money would be a problem of course, but there is always a chance of getting a job.

I have often thought about whether or not there is an afterlife. There are many theories about what comes after death and even though you realise that a human being cannot go on existing forever, simply for the lack of space, everyone or, at least, a lot of people cling to the thought of something being there after death. Whether people really believe in an afterlife or not is not important. I see it as wishful thinking.

I have often thought of writing a book. But then, what should I fill the empty pages with? Thinking about a possible topic, it comes to my mind that almost everything imaginable has already been said and been transformed into words by someone else. So would I be writing something myself, or would I only be copying somebody else's ideas? Is it still possible to make up something new to write about? Does it really have to be something "new"? Is not the idea of "creating" something as a writer a completely absurd one? Are you not only copying the world that exists around you anyway? So, no matter what you're writing, it's not your own. Even your conscience is the product of others, of the world, of history and society. But then again, couldn't you just write about yourself and what you think about it all? It doesn't have to be THE original, wave-breaking idea, but if it's about yourself, it's new and original per definitionem. For you and I are only on this planet in "one edition", you're not a series or a whole species. You are yourself and I am myself and that should be enough as a starting point. Just telling people about your own life should be enough to fill millions of pages, for life is so giving and creative. You don't need anything else.

5. I have long suspected that...

I have long suspected that my neighbour deals with drugs and now I am really sure. I watched him yesterday in the park handing a small bag to somebody who gave him a lot of money for it. I think I'll inform the police now.

6. I am constantly being told that...

I am constantly being told that I have a big nose. Now what's the effect of that on a ten-year-old child? It's devastating. Although it hadn't even reached its peak at that age. It became a lot worse during adolescence, when the rest of my face did not grow proportionally with my nose. The result was a very unfavourable nickname: something like "carrot". This name was quickly adopted by the entire class and cleverly combined with my second name. In the end I just decided that if my nose was big anyway, I would just have to make it look nice - and got a nose stud.

7. The older I get the more I realise...

The older I get the more I realise that there are some things in my past which seem regrettable. The funny thing is that I am not really sorry for the things I did but rather for the things I did not do.

The older I get the more I realise that time is very short. When I was a little child a whole year seemed like eternity to me. Months, weeks, even days appeared unbelievably long. I had to go to school in the morning, but there was so much time left afterwards that I could spend by myself. Now time passes by at an incredible speed - at least it seems like it to me.

The older I get the more I realise that people have no time to rest even for a while. They can't think about any one problem for too long. They show a lack of patience which makes it further impossible to solve any problem. The same holds true for friendships. Being unable to spend much time with one person, they fail to discover the feeling of love or to be loved. So perhaps it is possible to rediscover those and other similar feelings; if we are able to.

8. I shudder to think of what may happen when...

I shudder to think of what may happen when scientists will really be able to clone human beings. I was shocked when I heard that this is possible with sheep now and I wondered how long it would be until this would happen to human beings. It would be horrible to think that scientists would be able to create the perfect human being as often as they wanted to and that these people would really be identical. We would not be far away from the idea in Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* where they create only three sorts of people. I know that a long time might pass before we reach this stage, but the first step has been taken and although I won't be alive by the time it will be possible, I shudder when I think of it.

9. *The trouble with our (maths) teacher is...*

The trouble with our maths teacher is that he always gives us too much homework. It takes us hours to solve his problems. What is even worse is the fact that he never explains anything. We simply copy everything from the board, but we don't understand anything. When we did our last class test, nearly the whole class failed.

The trouble with our maths teacher is that she doesn't tell us the usefulness of this subject. It's important to show the pupils in what ways the learning material is relevant, because it's this relevance that motivates them.

10. *What I can't accept is the idea that...*

What I can't accept is the idea that humankind (the industrialised nations) destroys our environment without thinking of the generations to come. How can we take the risk of running a nuclear power plant if millions of people (especially those after us) will be affected by a serious accident? How can we destroy the rain forest and waste the energy sources that are still left without seriously thinking about alternatives? Is it because this would cost more money or would not earn as much money? Is it because we will not have to justify our actions to those born after us? Everyone should think more carefully about the future. We need to be more considerate and responsible. We owe it to our children.

11. *What disturbs me most is that...*

What disturbs me most is that it is hard to enjoy free-time without a sufficient amount of money because lots of activities are expensive. Also the construction of enormous buildings, houses and industries make small villages look like small cities; less woods, less meadows and less fields. And the weather; it is not possible to make a prediction for a long period of time. Everybody is forced to stay at home for too much time each year.

What disturbs me most is the constantly rising rate of unemployment. Being unemployed corresponds with entering a vicious circle of social problems. Apart from that, the most damaging effects concern the mental / psychological state of mind. A relative of mine now has to decide whether or not to leave his pregnant wife, who will give birth to her baby in two months, in order to get a job for three months. He really is under a lot of pressure. If he decides to stay at home and not go abroad, he may possibly regret it later. The danger of unemployment can really be considered as a source of fear and problems.

12. *Wouldn't it be great if...*

Wouldn't it be great if the weather was nice this weekend? If that were the case, I'd like to spend two happy days with some of my friends at Munich. Directly after this session I'd run to the telephone and organise the trip. But as the weather report told me this morning, there will be rainy and stormy weather during the next few days. I will have to spend my weekend doing my English studies.

Wouldn't it be great if our social system was organized as follows: you would get your pension when you were young and were able to enjoy your money and your spare time (e.g. by traveling around the world, experiencing other cultures or studying whatever subject you liked etc.) and then started working when you were about 40 or 50 years old. I admit that this system is rather insecure, for who can guarantee that every person who has been given a pension up to his / her fortieth or fiftieth year will live long enough to pay it back?
