

Students don't write, right?

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1. Abstract

Once upon a time there was a class of demotivated teenagers on the other side of the world who hated writing and an exhausted teacher who was at the end of his tether. What followed was a tale of overcoming adversity, trial and error, competition and ultimately... inspiration. Motivating students to write can be a challenge. Topics might not be relevant or interesting, tasks can be very traditional, writing can lead to a static classroom dynamic, tasks might not be authentic or give students a reason to write, and different groups and individuals may need help with different areas to develop their writing. So, what can be done? How can teachers help students develop their writing skills with tasks that enthuse and how can teacher educators support teachers in this endeavour? This paper will explore success stories in Sri Lanka and on the other side of the world that really got students engaged and enthused about writing. The key was micro writings, or small, bite-sized writing tasks. These can play a vital role in helping students to learn to write and develop their writing skills. Micro writing tasks can also be tailored to the needs of any class. Taking ideas from the process, product and genre approaches to writing, this paper also looks at how writing competitions and public display can help boost students' motivation to write and develop vital writing skills and sub-skills.

2. Sub-theme

This paper relates to the sub theme of Teaching Literature. The focus is on how micro writing, in this case 50-word stories or mini sagas, can play a key part in motivating students to write while also helping students to develop confidence in writing and writing skills.

3. Story

Sri Lankan students may encounter difficulties in their creative writing skill because they become examination oriented rather than life oriented. Developing writing skills has to be part and parcel of our teaching/learning culture because any piece of our own creative writing can give a great sense of pleasure, happiness and fulfilment to the learner as well as the teacher who guides them. Introducing 50-word stories or mini sagas into the classroom can bring about creativity in writing, promote critical thinking and fire students' imaginations very effectively. Any student who wants to improve their writing skills can get engaged with 50-word stories.

What is a 50-word story or mini saga? It's a type of micro writing, or mini writing task. A 50-word story is exactly that: a story with 50 words. Not 48 words, or 51 words, but exactly 50 words. This mini writing genre is an excellent way to help students develop their writing skills and get motivated to write. Students can choose to write a scary story, a funny story, a romantic story, a story with a moral or an unexpected twist. It's entirely up to them and this element of choice can be very motivating.

Since the choice of the topic is decided by the learner, he or she has more freedom to start with their own choice without any influence by the teacher. Of course, to support students, the teacher can provide them with some examples, or models as a guide and so that they can see the finished product; there are plenty of 50-word stories or mini sagas available online. www.fiftywordstories.com is a great website where readers submit their own stories and simply googling 50-word stories or mini sagas will provide teachers with a wealth of examples and even lesson plans. The teachers could even write their own as models for the students to aim for (or even improve upon!). It's also very beneficial for the teachers to go through the process of crafting, drafting and editing their stories, just as the students do. Once students have written their stories they can work collaboratively or individually to Leave-out, Amend, Remove and Add (LARA) to make it only for 50 words. By doing this, not only do they become writers, but they also edit and craft their own writing. As Graham Stanley says, 'good writers plan and revise, rearrange and delete text, re-reading and producing multiple drafts before they produce their finished document'. All of these are important writing sub-skills and are key elements of the process approach to writing.

With 50-word stories, students can write about things that they have really experienced in their lives, their class, their favourite things or their dreams, to name but a few ideas. The brainstorming process before they write can be extremely collaborative and serves to get students talking and working together. The only rule is that the story must be exactly 50 words, so students can let their creative juices flow, get motivated and inspired. As they create a 50-word story of their own, they also focus on the finished product while also developing their skills related to the process of writing. What's great about 50-word stories is that the tasks the teacher chooses to focus on in class can be really tailored to the needs and interests of a particular group. Tasks that focus on the content of the stories can be used if students would benefit from reading examples of the genre of 50-word stories. The teacher can choose some examples, asks students to read them and guess the title, guess the last 6 words (remember it must be exactly 6 words!) or edit the story so that it is exactly 50 words. In terms of linguistic focus, if the students need work on a particular area, the teacher can select tasks accordingly. For instance the focus could be on narrative tenses (the teacher blanks out the past tenses), punctuation (the teacher removes all the punctuation and students have to punctuate the story) or proofreading (the teacher deliberately adds some errors to the stories and the students have to correct them). 50-word stories also allow for a vast amount of collaborative work and discussion at the planning and crafting stage and peer feedback and correction with students reading each other's work, either during the crafting stage or reading the finished products.

Students of any age can be writers of 50-word stories. For example, one grade 8 student at Gallella Junior School, Kandy, Sri Lanka, who had previously struggled with her marks in English Language term tests, wrote an outstanding mini saga entitled "Emotion Salad". The ingredients of her emotion salad were 1 cup full of love, ½ a cup of kindness, 3 spoonfuls of compassion, 1 tablespoon of hatred and to end her 50

word story, she wrote “serve the emotion salad with friends and enemies.” Her classmates and teacher were all delighted by her imaginative story and she herself was extremely proud of what she had written. Below is another from a grade 6 student from Godamunna Junior School in Teldeniya Education Zone, who wrote the following beautiful 50-word poem back in 2001:

Sudden rains but no pains

Blue sky blue sky everywhere blue sky
Green trees green trees everywhere green trees
Birds fly birds fly everywhere birds fly
Dark clouds dark clouds everywhere dark clouds
Sudden rains sudden rains everywhere sudden rains
How happy to get wet and cover my puppy pet!
Because I love my PET

A similar success story can be told on the other side of the world in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where a teacher of an adolescent class that had never wanted to write got so inspired by 50-word stories that a class competition was born. This then turned into a school-wide competition and then grew into an inter-school competition, with students of all ages and levels taking part. Anything is possible when it comes to 50-word stories and micro writings: the only limit is your imagination.

4. Lessons and/or Recommendations

Micro writings and 50-word stories can be used by any teacher in any context to motivate students to write and develop their writing skills. The power of public display or giving students a real audience to read and appreciate their work, cannot be overstated. Suggestions include:

- displaying students' work on school notice boards, in a school magazine or English corners
- sharing students' work online so that their classmates, friends, parents and teachers can read it
- students could leave feedback, likes or vote for their favourites
- compiling a collection of 50-word stories as a class, school, zone or even province

5. References

Stanley, G. *'Approaches to Process Writing'*

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/approaches-process-writing> (accessed 10th June 2020)

50-word stories references:

Emotion Salad by Dilushi Chandrasekara, grade 8 student at Gallella Junior School, Kandy, Sri Lanka

*Sudden rain but no pains by Maheshika Ekanayaka, grade 6 student from
Godamunna Junior school, Teldeniya Education Zone, Central Province,
Sri Lanka*