

A Significant Influence: Describing an Important Teacher in Your Life

Author

[Patricia Schulze](#)
Yankton, South Dakota

Grade Band

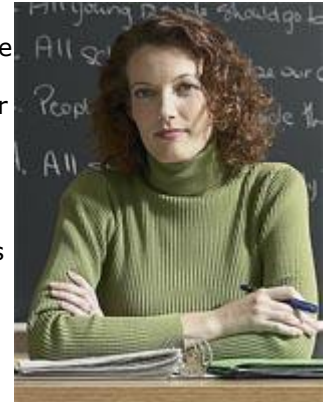
9-12

Estimated Lesson Time

Five 50-minute sessions

Overview

All of us have had a teacher who has made a profound difference in our lives—someone who changed our lives, made us think more deeply, set our feet on the right path. Perhaps it was a teacher we met in a classroom, but it could just have easily been a coach, a youth group leader, a family or community elder, or religious leader. In this project, students write a tribute to such a teacher, someone who has taught them an important lesson that they still remember. The personal essays that students write for this lesson are then published in a class collection. Because writing about someone who has been a significant influence is a typical topic for college application essays, the lesson's extensions include resources for writing more traditional, formal papers.



From Theory to Practice

Author T. A. Barron states that "There is nothing more heroic than the teacher who helps a young person discover those vast reserves inside himself or herself who gives him hope when all seems hopeless, who shows her dreams in the midst of nightmares, and teaches us all to face fear with strong determination" (11). Recognizing the importance that a teacher can hold in a student's life, this assignment asks students to recall a special teacher and capture that teacher's message in a personal essay. Diana Mitchell explains that when we "connect the work we ask [students] to do in school with their own lives, they can become eager, active participants in their own learning" (79). In successful units of this kind, "writing . . . is connected to students' lives" and "issues of student concern . . . are an important part of the class (83). By providing examples, modeling the activities, and engaging students in collaborative work, this lesson incorporates elements of best practice.

Further Reading

Barron, T.A. Letter included in "Dear Teachers: Letters to Another Hero." *Voices From the Middle* 9.2 (December 2001): 11.

Mitchell, Diana (ed.) "Starting with the Students (Teaching Ideas column)." *English Journal* 87.3 (March 1998): 79-83.

Student Objectives

Students will

- identify underlying lessons portrayed by an inspirational character in a reading or film.

- identify a similar teacher in their own lives.
- brainstorm, freewrite, and share preliminary ideas with peers.
- read and analyze personal tribute essays.
- write a personal tribute about someone who has made a significant influence on their lives.

Resources

- [Life Lessons from *Tuesdays with Morrie*](#)
- [Form for Sones' Poem](#)
- ["Dear Teachers" by Sonya Sones](#)
- [Teacher Tribute Rubric](#)
- [Excerpt from "From sanctuary, to the Teachers," by Paul Zindel](#)
- [ReadWriteThink Printing Press](#)
- *Tuesdays with Morrie* or a similar [book or movie](#) about a significant teacher

Instructional Plan

Resources

- *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson* by Mitch Albom or a similar [book or movie](#) about a significant teacher
- [Life Lessons from *Tuesdays with Morrie*](#)
- ["Dear Teachers" by Sonya Sones](#)
- [Form for Sones' Poem](#)
- [Excerpt from "From sanctuary, to the Teachers," by Paul Zindel](#)
- [Teacher Tribute Rubric](#)
- [ReadWriteThink Printing Press](#)

Preparation

- Gather copies of *Tuesdays with Morrie* or another [book or movie that includes an inspirational teacher](#). For purposes of the lesson, the teacher does not have to be a teacher in the classroom. A book in which a family or community elder shares a life lesson with other characters (e.g., *A Lesson Before Dying*) will also work. Note also that the teacher-student relationship does not need to be the primary focus of the story (e.g., Mrs. Crowley in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*).
- Students should have read or viewed the work that you've chosen before this project begins. Students might read the book as a class, work in literature circles reading different books in each group, or read novels independently. If you have chosen a film for this activity, show the film in class and discuss basic literary elements and film analysis.
- Acquaint yourself with [life lessons from *Tuesdays With Morrie*](#), or the book or movie what you've chosen. The list for *Tuesdays with Morrie* was collected by students. The list that your students create will probably be different.
- Make copies of handouts: ["Dear Teachers" by Sonya Sones](#), [Excerpt from "From sanctuary, to the Teachers," by Paul Zindel](#), and [Teacher Tribute Rubric](#).
- If desired, make an overhead transparency of [Sones' form](#).
- Test the [ReadWriteThink Printing Press](#) on your computers to familiarize yourself with the tool and ensure that you have the Flash plug-in installed. You can download the plug-in from the [technical support page](#).

Instruction and Activities

Session One

1. Prior to this session, read or watch *Tuesdays With Morrie* or the book or film you have selected.
2. As a class, brainstorm life lessons from book or film, creating a list that you can refer to later. The [Life Lessons from Tuesdays With Morrie](#) includes a list of lessons that were collected by students for that book. The list that your students create will be different, but the handout can provide a reference point for you as you talk about the book or film that you have chosen.
3. Pass out copies of [Sonya Sones' poem "Dear Teachers"](#) or project the poem using an overhead transparency.
4. Read the poem through as a class, and ask students to identify the life lessons that Sonya Sones describes in the poem.
5. Ask students to discuss how the three lessons (one for each teacher Sones mentions) relate to the final stanza of the poem.
6. Explain that students will write a tribute to an important teacher in their lives, making a comparison to the characters in the book or film that you have discussed as well as to the teachers in Sones' poem.
7. Students can begin gathering ideas by writing their own poems in their journals, modeled on Sones' poem. Begin by asking students to identify the structural similarities between the stanzas of the poem. They should easily determine the following [form](#):

To [name of the significant person],
my [role that the person played],
who..... [describe the person's influence in 3 to 4 lines]
I say [what you would say to the person]

8. Ask students to follow the model by filling in the names, roles, and significant contributions of teachers from their past. Explain that students can choose anyone who has taught them something. The people they choose do not have to be teachers in the traditional sense. A coach, a youth group leader, a family or community elder, or religious leader who has shared life lessons would also be appropriate.
9. Encourage students to use the form to get their ideas down in their journals. They need not worry about writing perfect poems at this point.
10. Once students have had enough time to write down at least two influential teachers, divide the class into groups of three to four students each.
11. In their groups, ask students to share details about the teachers whom they wrote about. Emphasize that students are simply talking about the people and lessons that they wrote about. They do not have to share the text of their poems unless they want to.
12. Groups should provide support and feedback on the lessons that members share.
13. Before the end of the session, bring the class together. For homework, ask students to choose one teacher who was influential in their lives. The choice can be someone that they wrote about in one of their verses or a completely different person. As with their writing in the poem, the teacher for their tribute essay does not have to be a teacher in the traditional sense. A coach, a youth group leader, a family or community elder, or religious leader is also appropriate.
14. If desired, students can also revise and polish their verses for homework and turn in copies at the beginning of the next session.

Session Two

1. If students polished their poems for homework, collect the poems. If desired, you might take a few minutes to invite students to share their poems if they'd like by reading them for the class.
2. Explain that during this session, the class will focus on one particular teacher. Students should have chosen a specific teacher for their tribute for homework.
3. Divide students into small groups. In each group, allow students approximately two minutes to tell others in their group whom they have chosen to write about and why. This preliminary discussion is the chance for students to share their basic stories with one another. Additionally, it gives students the chance to think through their ideas a bit before they begin writing. Group members can ask questions about any gaps or unclear information in the stories.

4. After students have shared their stories with their groups, give them five to ten minutes to do a freewrite in their journals on the same story they just shared with their groups. Because they have already talked through their stories, students should be able to begin writing right away—the process should help eliminate writer’s block. If you notice any students having problems getting started, quietly encourage them to just write a first draft of the story they shared with their groups.
5. Once students have a first written draft of their stories, rearrange groups so that students can share their stories with new listeners.
6. In their new groups, students read their drafts aloud. Again, group members can ask questions about any gaps or unclear information in the stories.
7. Give students time after they share their writing to make any corrections or additions to their tributes.
8. Pass out copies of the [excerpt from “From sanctuary, to the Teachers,” by Paul Zindel](#), and ask students to read the piece for homework.

Session Three

1. Ask students to brainstorm descriptive details from the [excerpt from “From sanctuary, to the Teachers,” by Paul Zindel](#). As students share ideas, write the information on chart paper or on the board.
2. Ask students to categorize the information that they have brainstormed into four categories: (1) information about the teacher herself, (2) information about the author (Zindel), (3) information about the underlying lesson, and (4) other details.
3. With the list categorized, ask students to talk about the relationships among the kinds of details that Zindel includes. Guiding questions for the discussion include the following:
 - How personal are the details?
 - How are specific details used?
 - How are objective and subjective details used?
 - How do the details communicate the significance of the memory?
 - How do the details talk about the teaching?
 - What is concrete information is taught, and what life lessons are taught?
4. Using the information from the classroom discussion, make a class checklist for the kinds of details that make Zindel’s tribute convincing.
5. Ask students to review their own drafts from the previous session, using the class checklist to guide their reading. If desired, ask students to divide the details from their own drafts into the four categories used for Zindel’s tribute; then, ask students to analyze the details and make changes to strengthen their writing.
6. If students find that they need significantly more details, assign the optional session and independent work so that students can interview the teacher or someone else who knew the teacher to gather more information.

Optional Sessions and Independent Work

Before the Interview

1. Begin interview preparation by asking students to decide whom they want to interview. If the teacher is not geographically, available, students could consider interviewing by telephone. Alternately, they might interview another student or person who knew the teacher. Perhaps a family member or another student also interacted with the teacher and can provide additional details, for instance.
2. Ask students to compile a list of questions they would like to ask the teacher they have written about, especially questions that relate to the lessons they learned.
3. Remind students that the more specific the questions, the more useful the answers will be, using the following example:

Imagine that Paul Zindel interviewed another student or family member about Miss Stillwell. He might ask questions such as “What do you remember about Miss Stillwell’s discussion of World War II?” rather than simply “What do you remember about Miss Stillwell?” The closer you can match your questions to the lessons that you are exploring, the more useful the details you gather will be.

4. Once they have brainstormed the questions they will ask, pair students so that they can practice their interview questions with a partner.
5. Arrange for students to make appointments to interview the people that they have chosen. Be sure that students explain the project and how the information from the interview will be used.

During the Interview

1. Encourage students to arrive on time for their interviews and to be ready to begin. They should have paper and a reliable pen or pencil for taking notes. If possible, students should tape the interview so that they can return to the information easily to fill in any gaps in their memory and/or notes.
2. As students interview the people whom they have chosen, ask that they take time to remind the person of the purpose of the interview, (if appropriate) to ask if the person is comfortable with taping the interview, and to spend some time visiting and talking before moving through the list of questions.
3. If appropriate for an illustration in the tribute, students can take photographs of the person and the location of the interview. Remind students to ask the person for permission before taking and using photographs.

After the Interview

1. If appropriate for use in the tribute, ask students to take several minutes to write a description of the person who was interviewed and the location where the interview took place. For instance, if students visit a classroom where a teacher taught them in the past, descriptive details about the classroom might be useful in the final draft.
2. If students have tape recorded the interview, have them return to the tape and take notes on significant details that can be used in their tributes. If students took notes, have them return to the notes and look for significant details.
3. Remind students that their task at this point is harvesting details and ideas from the interview. It is unlikely that they will use every detail in their final drafts. They are simply gathering ideas.
4. With the fresh list of details available, ask students to return to their drafts and revise their writing, using ideas and specific details that they gathered in their interviews.

Session Four

1. Pass out copies of the [Teacher Tribute Rubric](#), and go over the guidelines as a class.
2. Pair students, have them trade papers, and have them use the [Rubric](#) to provide feedback on each other’s work. Encourage students to provide concrete suggestions for improvement.
3. Based on student need and experience, you might add one or more of the following mini-lessons that will help students complete their work:
 - connotation and details:
[She Did What? Revising for Connotation](#)
 - punctuating dialogue:
[Inside or Outside? A Mini-Lesson on Quotation Marks and More](#)
 - paragraphing dialogue:
[Character Clash: A Mini-Lesson on Paragraph Breaks and Dialogue](#)

- using dialogue tags:
[Choosing Clear and Varied Dialogue Tags: A Mini-Lesson](#)
- 4. Students can use any remaining time in the class to make revisions to their drafts. Encourage students to continue sharing work with partners as they revise.
- 5. Ask students to come to the next session with the final draft of their tributes, which will be published in a class booklet.

Session Five

1. Demonstrate the [ReadWriteThink Printing Press](#) for students, displaying the booklet templates.
2. Ask students to print at least three copies of their work (one for themselves, one for you to respond to, and (if appropriate) one for the teacher whom they have written about). If class resources allow, additional copies can be made to share with interested students in the class. Copies should also be made for anyone interviewed for the tribute.
3. This will be a busy, active session so ensure that students understand the product they are to submit by the end of the class before releasing them to work on their final copies.
4. Allow students the remainder of the class to print copies of their own pages for the class booklet.
5. If possible, schedule an additional class session where students can share their finished tributes with the class.

Extensions

- As an alternative, students can use the [Letter Generator](#) to publish “Dear Teacher” letters, similar to the examples that have been shared during the unit. If appropriate, students can send a copy of their letters to the teachers they have written about in their tributes.
- College application essays often ask students to write about a significant influence, so this lesson plan can provide students with the opportunity to draft a piece that they can use later as they apply to college. The following resources can provide additional information to help focus students’ work on these more traditional, formal papers:
 - [College Essay Writing Tips](#), from the College Board
 - [Tips for Writing Your College Application Essay](#), from the Associated Colleges of the Midwest
 - [Writing the Personal Statement](#), from the Purdue OWL
 - [How to Write an Application Essay](#) from Foothill College
 - [Writing the College Application Essay](#), from the Bryn Mawr College, Office of Admissions

Web Resources

[Commentary: Tribute to My Sixth-Grade Teacher](#)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1329308>

In this National Public Radio commentary, student Anthony Brooks shares a tribute to his sixth-grade teacher. This audio file provides another example of a teacher tribute, composed from a student’s perspective.

[Commentary: Ms. Patel, 3rd Grade Teacher Extraordinaire](#)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3046055>

This National Public Radio commentary explores what a parent learned about education from his son’s third-grade teacher.

[Reading Group Guide for *Tuesdays with Morrie*](#)

<http://www.randomhouse.com/features/morrie/guide.html>

This list of 25 questions covers the main characters (Mitch and Morrie), death, religion, culture, ritual, and relationships.

Student Assessment/Reflections

Students should have a chance to read the various tributes included in the class collection. Informal feedback in the class from other students who know the teacher being described or remember similar lessons taught by another teacher can provide useful encouragement for students and underscore how audiences react to details and specific information. Perhaps the best informal feedback a student can mention is to say, "I wish I had that teacher." Listen for such comments as students share their work and ask readers to elaborate for the author on the details of the tribute that led them to make such a wish.

For more formal assessment, use the [Teacher Tribute Rubric](#), which student pairs use to evaluate drafts of their final work.

NCTE/IRA Standards

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

5 - Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

7 - Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

11 - Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12 - Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).