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Using Historical Photographs to Stimulate Writing in Adult Literacy and ABE Programs



PANL A7-12

A Resource Kit with 70 images
from Newfoundland and Labrador



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PANL B16-101

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Why Photographs?



Member of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment.
(PANL A11-153)

We often say a picture is worth a thousand words. Perhaps we mean there's a lot to see in them. Photographs capture scenes, moods, relationships, places, moments snatched out of time. They freeze time in ways that time itself does not allow. Maybe that's why people are drawn to taking photographs, to keeping them and looking at them long after they are taken. The very aspects of photographs that draw us to look at them are also the elements that make photographs good stimuli for writing.

Stuck with Blank Paper and Nothing to Write?

Unfortunately, this is often what happens when a person is encouraged to write. The mind crowds with multiple possibilities, then goes blank. The blank paper sits there like a reproach. There are a host of things that can keep us from "just writing" - including thinking we have to have a "topic," thinking we have "nothing to say," expecting to begin and continue in perfect sentences, criticizing ourselves and fearing the criticism and scrutiny of others. All of these are elements of "writers' block." Even professional writers experience it; it's not surprising that beginning writers experience it a lot. The challenge of becoming comfortable as a writer is recognizing this block for the common, temporary thing it is, and finding ways around it.

The Photo as Jumping-Off Point



Woman at Sheshatshiu.
(CNS Monsignor E.J. O'Brien
Collection)

Photographs can be great jumping-off points for writing. They give us detours around writers' block. A photo in front of a writer is packed with ready images, and all really good writing is image-based. Any good photo will have a focal point - a feature or figure or face - that draws the eye and asks for a response. In this way, photographs get the writer moving beyond questions of subject or topic or "something to say."

Photographs also hold within them the possibility of surprise. While some writers are surprised to find they stimulate content at all, others are surprised to be led in new directions. Some writers are always writing the same story, or focusing narrowly on one thing. The photograph may take a writer beyond this, and into new places. A writer may look at a photograph and recognize something of the self, of

one's own story. But a photo can also prompt a writer to step outside the confines of his or her own skin, into expanded identification, empathy, a sense of the larger world.

If the writing instructor or workshop leader says, "just look at the photograph in front of you and write what comes to mind," the writer can feel free to write associations, images, random notes, bits of story, ideas, all of which are somehow stimulated by the photograph. It is in itself the unifying thing, and it's right in front of the writer with all its possibilities. Many writers are pleasantly surprised by where this kind of writing "takes them." But in order to get there, they have to first feel free to take off.

Freewriting with Photographs

Freewriting is perhaps the easiest way to approach using photographs, and it often produces the most imaginative results. Freewriting works basically as follows:

- A writer might write without a stimulus, but this is better for writers who are used to freewriting as a process. Using a stimulus - such as a photograph - makes freewriting easier for beginners, and serves as a source of new content for anyone facing writers' block.
- A workshop leader or instructor introducing a freewriting exercise using photographs either pre-selects a photo for each writer, or asks the writers to choose a photo that appeals to them. There should always be more photos than writers, so writers do not feel "stuck" with a choice. Seventy historical images are included in this resource kit.
- The writer should place the photo in front of him/her, and have paper and a pen or pencil ready.

Writers do not begin until the workshop leader or instructor lists the freewriting guidelines and tells them to go ahead.

An instructor or workshop leader who is using this approach for the first time may find it helpful to introduce the exercise by using a few photographs and asking the group to generate a list of possible content for each one. Writers will hear the range of images and thoughts the photo stimulates.



Music in the bay.
CNS coll 99, 1.102

These brainstorming sessions can also help writers become more comfortable with their own ideas.

The back of each photo includes descriptive information on the image. Some writers may find this information helpful but others might feel it restricts their ideas. You could suggest that writers ignore the label until the writing is completed.

Freewriting Guidelines

- Freewriting exercises should have a set time limit: ask people to write for five or 10 minutes. Some writers might like more time.
- The instructor or leader says something like: "When I say begin, put your pen on paper, write what comes to mind, and keep going. Keep your pen moving, always forward, never look back and never stop to correct anything. Tell your inner critic to get lost. If you get stuck, write *I'm stuck*, or anything - even nonsense words - until a new idea comes. Keep writing whatever comes to mind, and let it take you wherever it wants to go. I'll let you know when time's up. Any questions? Now begin."
- The instructor/leader times the exercise and lets writers know when time is up. At this point, writers should finish the sentence they're working on and stop writing.



Murdock McLean of Labrador, circa 1930. CNS Coll 096, 7.03.046



Lobsters at Pool's Island,
1939.
PANL VA14-184

After the Exercise

There is often energy in the room after a freewriting exercise. It's a good time for sharing writing and for discussion because writers have often produced something unexpected, have gone to places undreamed of and found a flow and rhythm that kept them moving on. A story or poem or memoir has begun to unfold on what was a blank page moments before. This is exciting. Also, many writers produce a page of writing - or two or three - in a few minutes, more than they usually produce when they sit in front of the blank page and have time to remind themselves of all the reasons not to write.

You can get discussion going by asking the writers about the process they just went through: Did anything come to mind that surprised you? Did the

photo take you anywhere you were surprised to go? How did it feel to write without stopping? After people are comfortable discussing things freely, ask if any writer would like to read what they've written - or part of it. It is usually not hard to find a volunteer, and another and another, after one reader has broken the ice.

Before reading, each writer should show others his or her photo. Reluctant oral readers should be invited to have someone else read for them (it's the writing that counts here). The group should feel free to respond to each writer's work, with one caution - everyone should be mindful that freewriting is by definition *first draft* writing. No one should respond to it as if it were a finished piece.



Community well at
Portugal Cove, 1949.
G. Blouin/NAC PA-128013

At this point, the instructor or workshop leader can do three useful things in providing feedback. He or she can comment on vivid images and memorable lines or sentences in each writer's piece. She or he can note that freewriting yields a real mixture - every writer produces some fine pieces of writing and also other bits the writer may not decide to keep. The third useful thing is to pose the revision question - ask each writer: what do you think you'd like to do with the piece you wrote today? What do you like best about it? Where do you think you'd like to go with that?

Such questions give the writing a future.

Expanding Possibilities

This document covers only one writing exercise in detail. Essentially what's described above is a union of two writing techniques - freewriting and using external stimuli. There are many other ways to use freewriting, and many more ways to use photographs. Here are some of them.

Other Photo Possibilities

Although the freewriting exercise discussed here involved choosing photos from the resource kit, there are other possibilities, both in classrooms and in individual writing projects.

- Writers can use family photograph albums to do a series of writing exercises with each one based on a photograph. This is a way of both unlocking memories and approaching a larger story in small sections.
- Writers can use photographic collections in community museums, in archives or municipal buildings to explore historic themes and events.
- Writers can choose a person in a photo to be a character in a story or play; a person, place or object can be the beginning image for a poem.
- Writers can use photos of places they have never been, things they have never experienced, to write straight from the imagination and to escape temporarily to other worlds and possible lives.
- Writers can gather up images from calendars or publications such as *National Geographic*. Books of photographs might be available at flea markets or second-hand bookstores. A sharp knife can be used to cut the photographs away from the binding.



Woman at Brookfield, 1939.
PANL VA14-204

Using Other Prompts for Writing

Using photos with freewriting is only one kind of "guided" freewriting. You can also use objects selected randomly from a bag, the view out the window, a piece of music or just about any item - a favourite piece of clothing or a souvenir - to stimulate writers. Subsequent freewriting sessions can explore an idea further or use a line or image from the previous writing as a way to move to new ground.

Once writers are comfortable with freewriting, they can be encouraged to try it on their own at home or somewhere else. For it to work they need to adhere to the guidelines, but after all the exercises take little time and are very low-tech - pencil or pen, paper and some kind of timepiece being the only equipment needed.



Man with pipe, circa 1935.
CNS Coll 198, 6.01.10

Focus on Process

Although using photographs to stimulate writing yields the very concrete result of words on the page, it is also meaningful in less tangible but important ways. As a writing technique, it is one of

many that reminds us that writing is a process. Writing is not the magic preserve of a gifted few whose first drafts pour forth flawlessly. No, it's an art and a craft whose mysteries can be unlocked. It involves work and technique, but no magic potion. It can be more pleasure than pain, and there is no better way for an instructor or workshop leader to find this out than to try the exercises along with the learners.

Using photographs also leads our writing into possibilities of identification and expansion; we may find our way to memory, to our own doorsteps, or away along a different path to someplace we've never been.

Writing Samples

Students, teachers and tutors worked with us in field testing the resource materials. Here are some of the draft texts produced in their freewriting sessions.



Children at the St. Anthony
orphanage.
PANL VA92-22

Memories. Two little girls enjoying some jam on a hot summer day. For my friend and I, it was sitting in the backyard with two spoons into the peanut butter on a hot summer day. Do they realize what an orphanage is or how different their lives are from other children? They look so happy. Both children too young to realize what prejudice is. It is something we learn, not something we are born with? Do they realize their skin color is different, their eyes are shaped different? They are different looking but they are so much alike. Neither child has parents. They look at life through their own eyes. My friend and I were both white. No difference there. We both had mothers but we also had fathers who abandoned us. We had not prejudice. Not until later at school when children pointed it out did we realize we were different from them. They had dads. Maybe not always good ones but at least they had one. School taught us that we were different. It is when....



Children at the St. Anthony
orphanage.
CNS Coll 223, 5.01

Cleaning Ladies

Sally and Jessie were up to their necks in housework. It was Monday morning and Sally, the boss, was hard at the wash tub. Her thoughts skipped to her younger days when she was just a youth. How she loved to frolic about playing and wasting her time. How she longed to have those days back.

She remembered the day and how exciting it was to have a job, let alone a good job at the big house upon the hill. How she thought her life would change, how the money would roll in and all she did was the same dumb chores she did for her mother at home for free. How wrong she was. How life sucked. Her hands were dry and cracked from always being in wash water. Her back ached most days and she was always endlessly up to her neck in responsibility. Missus would be calling her soon to want her noon lunch. She thought about the "what ifs." She longed to tell Jessie to quit now and make a real life for herself.

The picture reminds me of childhood days - summer - hot sun - cool soothing water - freedom of everyday days - only thoughts of what to explore next - letting curiosity guide - camaraderie - feeling one with your friends and surroundings - the luxury of laziness combined with what's around the next comer. The smell of the earth, the slight lapping sound of water against the boat - the feeling of the sun on your face with your eyes closed - the opposite feeling of cool water on your hand dangling over the side.



Dory sailing on the
Humber River, circa 1896.
CNS Coll 137, 16.04.017

In the woods I go. Is this too big? Is this one too small? Have I got enough hoops for you yet, Pop? I must hurt to get these back so Pop can get the barrels finished for the day. Maybe I will help him nail the hoops on or maybe I'll just clean up the wood chips and saw dust. Who is there helping him today I wonder? Maybe if I go faster he will let me use the saw. I doubt it. I wonder if he will take me fishing after supper? Did I dig enough worms yesterday? I must go faster so we can get all the work done.



Making barrels.
CNS Coll 079, 4



Ross's Farm, St John's,
circa 1895.
PANL E6-7

This particular picture brings to mind some very happy memories. When I was a small child we would spend many long, beautiful sunny days in the meadows, watching my grandparents and my parents cutting, raking, spreading and as they called it back then, making hay. As children we would run and play through the fields, hiding behind piles of new mown hay. I can almost hear my grandmother's voice calling us to come and have a drink or a slice of bread. It was time in our lives when we were all together and happy. As I think back, I'm sure the adults in that group must have been concerned and worried as we are today, but at that time everything seemed wonderful.



Crew on schooner deck,
circa 1900.

PANL VA85-281

You wouldn't look very happy either. We've been out to sea for one full month. We've run out of grub, our feet stink, and no pipe tobacco. She's got three broken ribs, the jack piece broke, and her main jib is snapped off. There is a half-hole full offish, a hole full of dories with the okum out of their seams, and to top it all off we are very wet and cold. But it's very nice to be back at port alive and well. With the little bit of fish we have, we will sell some to the markets and the rest we will barter for supplies for the winter. Then we'll be back again the spring for the same gruelling task of stinky feet, running out of tobacco and food. What fools we must be but we must do it to save our families.
I'm stuck.



Lumber camp,
Botwood, 1906.

PANL B1-101

This is an old logging camp picture from years ago. Believe or not this is the way they use to cut and haul the wood for the paper mill. I often heard my father talk about these old camps, and how hard things really were. He said there would be eighteen to thirty men in one camp. "No power saws back then," he said, 'just the old buck saw and axe. It was nothing but hard manly labour, from daylight till dark six days a week."

In this picture it looks like the men have just arrived in a new camp and are sizing up the situation. They look like they're waiting for the lead hand or the foreman as they are known today. One thing is for sure, it's a great place for a lumber camp by the looks of all the trees in the background. Oh, by the way, that building you see in the picture, it's not a sawmill. That's the bunk house. You see in those days when you went in the woods for six days you stayed for six: sleep or no sleep.

Revising the Drafts

No writer can produce a polished piece in five or 10 minutes. Instructors and workshop leaders help students find a future for their writing when they ask the revision question: where do you want to go with this piece?

In this sample, the writer has moved beyond the original text produced in the freewriting session. Sentences have been crafted, characters have been developed, and a strong story line has been created.

Excerpts from the Diaries of Arnie and Luke
Liverpool, England
May 1938

Well, we made it! We're sailing to America at last. My getting on this ship was all above board you could say, but old Luke there, well he had to do it in a sneaky sort of way. When Ma told me she had a job for me with Captain Tibbo, I didn't know it would mean my having to leave home. But then captains sail ships and need cabin boys, so here I am.

And Luke, oh you should have seen him that morning we set sail. He came down to the dock with Ma and me. Ma was all snivellin' and bawlin', and she knows I can't stand that stuff. She thought I needed her hankie but I told I was a bigger man than would take a thing like that on a public dock in front of me mates. After all I was going on thirteen years old. We talked a while, she telling me to be careful, and to not mind the Captain's harsh ways, and to mind me manners, and all the while Luke was pacing back and forth with his head down and his tail between his legs. Mulligan's cat walked right in front of him and he didn't even bother to chase her. Twas a sight, I'll tell ya.

Anyway, I was telling you about Luke's getting on board. Well, sir we were ready to set sail and I climbed the gangplank. Ma was waving and still daubing her eyes with the hankie. Then I saw him.



Boy and dog on wharf,
circa 1938.
PANL VA6-13

Luke just gave a run, right up the gangplank and smack dab into old Tibbo himself. Tibbo never did like Luke. I know that for a fact because every time Tibbo was in port, he liked to visit Ma and me - well mostly just Ma. Luke used to growl and snap at him, but that was only after Tibbo kicked him in the ribs one night for no reason at all. "Get that g-damn crackie off my ship," he shouted. Luke tried to get around him, but the first mate cornered him and threw him back on the dock. Poor Luke. It was hard enough to have to leave him and go off for God knows how long - it was hard leaving Ma too, of course but a man's dog, well that's a different story.

The boat sailed away and my heart went back to my one and only friend staring after me from the dock with his big brown eyes, wagging his tail, and oh, such a sorrowful face.

We moved off and the dock grew smaller. There was not a ripple on the water. Then there was splash, right off the end of the dock. And the crowd cheered and I heard Ma cry, "No Luke, come back boy, come back."

But he swam on. Captain Tibbo and the first mate were busy setting the rigging and charting the course. I watched Luke with my heart racing and my mouth gone dry. "Dry as a chip" Billy Flynn would say when we'd grab apples from old man Timmon's cart and run like lightening so he wouldn't see us. We'd race down to the end of Barrow Street and up to the Dell pasture, and there we'd sit. All the running and the fear of getting caught would leave us gasping for breath and our mouths dry. Luke would run with us, and boy could he go. But this swimming. I didn't know how long it'd be before he got tired and then what? I wanted to call to him and tell him to go back. But then, I thought how good it would be to have him with me. I couldn't say a word for fear that Tibbo would hear. I leaned over and patted the side of the ship. She was slowing down as the crew was preparing for the open water.

Luke saw me and it seemed as though he gained new strength. He was nearing the side but how was I ever going to get him aboard?

I scanned the deck for something, and then Tibbo called, "Come on boy, I didn't take ye from ya Ma to stand around and gawk at the scenery. Get up here and earn ya keep."

I hoped he didn't see Luke. I looked over the side and he was still swimming. I had to get him in soon, or he'd never make it. I took one last glance around and there was a piece of netting stowed neatly against the far side. I ran over, picked it up, and went back to the side Luke was swimming on. Over the netting went and Luke knew what he had to do. As soon as he was secure in the net I pulled it in. He was shivering, and wagging his tail. He'd made it without being seen and then I had to make plans to keep him on board as a stowaway.

July 1938

We've been in and out of so many ports since arriving in Newfoundland two weeks ago that I can't keep track of the names. Luke is still a secret to Captain Tibbo, but the rest of the crew knows about him. Even Big Jake has taken a shine to him since Luke saved him from going over the side in that wind and rain storm. We visited a small port this morning before getting into St. John's, and I took Luke ashore for a stroll. He misses being able to run and he can't even come up on deck, only when old Tibbo is napping in the afternoon. I got off the boat as quickly as I could when the first mate said we could have some time ashore. I slipped down the gangplank, watched for the Captain, and as soon as he was out of sight, I called to Luke. He came running toward me.

As I turned away from the ship, a little man in a hat carrying one of those big cameras came toward me. He asked me my name, where I was coming from and did I own that dog. He pointed to Luke who just sat by my side without a stir. I told him what he wanted to know, and then asked who he was and why he wanted to know about me.

He said his name was Joe, and he worked for some newspaper in St. John's. "Just curious," he said, and then went on to talk about boys who start work early and grow up to be hard working men who will some day bring about changes in... Well sir, he lost me after that because I don't know much about politics and I think that's what he was talking about. Luke and I stood still and listened.

I remembered Ma telling me to mind me manners. After a while he asked if he could take our picture. I'd never had a picture taken before, and I was pretty sure that Luke didn't either. But I had to be careful, not so much for myself, see, but for my dog. "Is it going to hurt, sir?"

The little man in the big hat laughed. "No my son, it won't hurt a bit." I picked Luke up, just so he wouldn't be scared, and Joe Smallwood was right, it didn't hurt a bit.

Acknowledgments

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We also thank those who helped us develop the resource kit. Writers in a variety of settings worked with us throughout the process. Field tests on the package were done with adult literacy and ABE students in St. John's and Bay Roberts. The Network would like to thank Doris Hapgood, the staff and students of Rabbittown Learners Program, and Paula King and students at the Discovery Centre for working with the materials, sharing the texts they wrote, and providing the feedback that helped shape the final resource kit. We also experimented with the photo resources in other settings: adult literacy tutor training events, and workshop and course sessions with former and current literacy and ABE students.

Other people helped us locate and access the images. Shelley Smith, Director of the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL) supported our efforts and gave us permission to use PANL images. Wayne Sturge, Tony Murphy, Cal Best, Melanie Tucker and other PANL staff answered many questions, processed our requests, and ordered reprints of the images. John Bourne made photographs of all the images from that collection. At Memorial University, Bert Riggs and Linda White guided us in our search of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives (CNSA), as did Heather Wareham of the Maritime History Archive (MHA). Helen Miller at the City of St. John's Archives assisted us with their collection; Alice Story of the Lillian Stevenson Nursing Archive and Museum shared images from the photograph collection of Mary Southcott; and the North Atlantic Aviation Museum provided us with a wartime image from the Gander Air base. The National Archives of Canada list their photographs on a web site, and gave us permission to use the ones we selected for this kit. Linda Cullum combed the archives to obtain images we hope will spark writers in your setting. Steve Walsh at the MUNSU Copy Centre supervised the reproduction and lamination of the photographs. We thank him and his staff for their attention to the job.



Working the pit saw at
Grey River, circa 1890s.
PANL A2-98



Snowshoeing, circa 1930s.
CNS Coll 203, Box 3

Sources for Historical Photographs Used in the Resource Kit

Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL)
Colonial Building
Military Rd.
St. John's, NF
A1C 2C9
729-3065 (p) 729-0578 (f)
Web Site: <http://www.gov.nf.ca/panl>

Helen Miller
City of St. John's Archives
Second Floor, City Hall
P.O. Box 908
St. John's, NF
A1 C 5M2
576-8226 (p) 576-8254 (f)
Email: archives@city.st-johns.nf.ca

National Archives of Canada
395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
613-992-3884 (p) 613- 995-6274 (f)
Web Site: <http://www.archives.ca>

Centre for Newfoundland Studies
Archives (CNSA)
Queen Elizabeth II Library
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland
A1B 3Y1
737-4349 (p) 737-2153 (f)
Web Site: <http://www.mun.ca/library/cns/archives/cnsrch.html>

Maritime History Archive (MHA)
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland
A1C 5S7
737-8428 (p) 737-3123 (f)
Web Site: <http://www.mun.ca/mha>

North Atlantic Aviation Museum
PO. Box 234
Gander, NF
A1V 1W6
256-2923 (p) 256-4477 (f)

Your local community museum may also have photographs and objects useful for stimulating writing. For information on these sources contact:

Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archivists
(ANLA) c/o The Colonial Building
Military Road
St. John's, Newfoundland
A1C 2C9
726-2867 (p) 729-0578 (f)
Web Site: <http://www.anla.nf.ca>



M.J. O'Brien and family, 1939.
PANL E4-14