

Literary 3 x 3

This activity is taken directly from:

<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/ap-sf-enlit-writing-about-literature.pdf>

William Melvin Kelley suggests that a prospective writer of fiction should create three, three-word sentences that summarize an intended plot to be sure that the story contains a beginning, middle, and end. I ask my students to reverse this format to go well beyond the plot, to state (and analyze) the essence of a work they have read (short story, narrative poem, or chapter of a novel). For example, Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" could be summarized as follows:

- Minnie kills husband.
- Men seek evidence.
- Women hide evidence.

Such a summary restates the basic plot but does not say much about the real issues of this short story. It does not answer questions as to why Minnie has killed her husband, how the men differ from the women in their attitude toward her guilt, or whether the concealing of evidence is morally right. Contrast that generic summary with these more insightful versions done by some of my students:

- Apathy strangles devotion.
- Tidiness uncovers truth.
- Sympathy chokes justice.

- Guilt creates bond.
- Chair symbolizes satisfaction.
- Bird justifies death.

- Unpredicted fate evolves.
- Curiosity unearths reality.
- Empathy conceals truth.

- Guilt consumes women.
- Curiosity unveils evidence.
- Lost heart's saved.

Students creating these samples were required to observe the specific literary 3 x 3 guidelines below in their response to this piece of literature:

A literary 3 x 3 will use the following:

- complete sentences
- effective word order
- strong words, especially verbs and adjectives

An effective literary 3 x 3 may also use the following:

- abstract nouns
- contractions using “is”

A literary 3 x 3 **will not** use the following:

- proper nouns/names
- repeated words
- “to be” verbs
- pronouns
- clichés
- a, an, the

Creation of the initial literary 3 x 3 is just one step in a complex analytical process. Students share their responses with the rest of the class, who examine the sentences for accuracy in following the rules. For example, the complete-sentence requirement is occasionally overlooked as students focusing so diligently on word choice neglect the basic subject and predicate rule. Once any errors in guidelines are corrected, we look at each 3 x 3 for its quality. The class makes suggestions as to which word or words are least effective in the response. They might note inaccuracies in interpretation of character motivation or plot details, examine connotations of the diction selected, and perhaps suggest alternative words for the writers to consider. Each pair of students then reassesses their 3 x 3, making at least one change in word choice as they revise. (It is important that all students make changes—even the students who typically are always right in their responses—since this is a process of continuously deepening response.) Finally, students write a short essay analyzing the process, explaining what they had tried to capture about the story in their original response, then analyzing the changes they have made in the final product. Note part of the analysis done by students who created the 3 x 3s above:

- Amber and Amanda explained their first sentence (“Guilt creates bond”) this way: “In creating our 3 x 3, we knew that we wanted to explain the bond between the two women in the story... how it is created through the mutual guilt of the women.”
- Hannah and Sara also used the word guilt (“Guilt consumes women”), adding their rationale that “the women feel guilty because they never visited Mrs. Wright prior to the death of her husband. Their guilt is so intense that they are completely consumed by it.” In analyzing their third line (“Lost heart’s

saved”), the girls continued: “Mrs. Peters says of Mrs. Wright, ‘A person gets discouraged—and loses heart’ (319). The women conceal the evidence from the men, causing Mrs. Wright’s ‘lost heart’ to be saved in the end.”

- Amber and Lisa explained that they changed “Unpredicted fate arises” to “Unpredicted fate evolves” because “evolves shows how an unpredicted fate continues to happen throughout the story instead of just arising and happening at one point in time.”
- Kelsey and Danica explain tidiness (“evidence is found due to the cleanliness of the women at the scene”) and strangles (“used both literally and figuratively”) as a reference to the manner of killing her husband and the suffocation of the marriage.

This activity can take several variations:

(1) The literary 3 x 3 can be done as an individual homework assignment and then discussed with two or three other students for revision purposes.

(2) Initial 3 x 3s can be created by individuals and then combined to make a single 3 x 3 that a group can support, merging ideas from each other’s responses.

(3) A single 3 x 3 can be left on the board for several days as students think about how to fine-tune the response to satisfy the entire class. This process of expressing complex ideas with very specific language helps students examine literature in real depth, as well as explore subtle nuances of specific diction. Students argue persuasively for one word over another as they try to get to the very essence of a story, exploring the text in depth for evidence to support their claims.