

Picture Prompts for Young Writers

Elinor DeWire, Education Chair, U.S. Lighthouse Society

Who doesn't enjoy an interesting picture? I have used picture prompts as story-starters to encourage writers of all ages, grade 2 through community college, as well as adult writing classes. Emergent writers need inspiration and confidence. For those who are strong visual thinkers, images can serve to inspire and guide a story, be it fiction or nonfiction.

I encourage educators, youth leaders, and parents to provide picture prompts to help young writers overcome "writers' block" and to facilitate strong, fluent thinking that produces sound writing. In this file are seventy-five images of lighthouses. Use them for a writing assignment when doing a lighthouse unit. Or, use them for any writing work, including "Writers' Workshop." Example—

- Discussion circles of three to five students allows them to talk about their chosen or assigned images and compare ideas. Give the discussion groups guide questions, such as "What is special or unique about your image?" "What would you say the mood is in your image?" "What do you like or dislike about your image." And so on. Use discussion group rules: Everyone gets a chance to speak. Listen to what others say. Ideas are valued, and criticism is positive. Help each other expand thoughts and ideas. Remind students that it is okay to incorporate other classmates' ideas into their stories; they will add their own color and flair to shared ideas. A.K.A. Use a connected-brain strategy.
 - As part of Writing Workshop, have students describe the details seen in their images. These details can be used later, when they draft a story, to enrich the quality of writing.
- Example using Image Prompt 44:



The image shows a woman and a lighthouse. The lighthouse is tall, cone-shaped, and painted with thick black and white horizontal bands. There is a yellow building behind the woman. The building has a wavy edge on its roof. The woman looks like someone's grandma. She is smiling. She has white hair and wears sunglasses. Her shirt is flowered and her jacket is black. She seems happy. She stands in front of the yellow building with the lighthouse in the background. The lighthouse appears to be growing out of her head. It makes her look like she is wearing a lighthouse hat. The photo is kind of funny.

- Next, ask students to write a story opener based on what they see in the image. Tell them to use their description of the photo to write the opener, but remind them that they need not use everything in the description. (It's a smorgasbord of ideas, and like a food smorgasbord they would not want to eat everything!) The image, description, and opener will work together later to help students fashion a story. Example of Opener:
One day my grandma took me to the beach. I had my camera with me. I hoped to take some interesting photos of things I saw at the coast. There was a tall, black and white, striped lighthouse, and I took lots of photos of it from all angles. One photo was really special, though, thanks to my comical and fun-loving grandma. She stepped right in front of the lighthouse and smiled happily. Her white hair and black jacket seemed to blend in with the lighthouse. She was trying to make the lighthouse seem to grow out of her head like a big, fancy hat. Then, she walked away, and guess what happened! That zany lighthouse hat went with her!
- Use the details and opener to draft your story. The visual thinking already done facilitates the drafting process. The story can proceed in numerous directions. It might focus on grandma's sense of humor. It could inspire a how-to piece of writing about taking funny photos. It might become a fantasy tale about a grandma's supernatural abilities. And, more.
- After drafting, ask students to title their stories based on what they wrote. (As a professional writer, I always title a piece of writing after drafting it. This helps me capture the story and focus my writing during the revision stages.) Have students come up with several titles and then choose the best and highlight it. (They love highlighters!) Example: "A Lighthouse Hat" "How Grandma Made a Lighthouse into a Hat" "Grandma Wore a Crazy Coastal Hat." "Grandma's Magical Seaside Hat" Notice how the title evolves.
- A collection of story-starters and their images (like the one above) can be stored in students' Writing Portfolios. These give quick, sensory, and varied inspiration when it's time for Writing Workshop. With several story starters to choose from, there will be much less writers' block when young scribes to get to work! Make color copies of the images you want students to use and give them to students to keep in their portfolios. Have students organize their Writing Portfolios like this: picture prompts in one section, images with descriptions in another section, and images with descriptions and story-starters all stapled together in another section. Notes and snippets of info can go in a pocket. (Most professional writers organize each writing project in a similar way.) When students have completed their stories, clip together all parts of it in order to emphasize the writing process at work—image, description, story-starter, first draft, revision, second draft, final copy with title. The final product will be a beautiful thing!

Francis Drake once said: "Nothing moves the imagination like a lighthouse." I can vouch for it. I've written several hundred articles and short stories about lighthouses and other topics, not to mention numerous books, including novels. I'm a strong visual thinker who knows the value of images. When I write for the U.S. Lighthouse Society's *The Keepers Log*, or any other publication or publisher, images always guide my writing.

As a young student, I was a doodler, daydreamer, and a scatterbrain, as well as an avid reader. At the time, I had no idea how important these characteristics were. Often, I was scolded for them. One of my teachers cautioned my mother about my colorful imagination. Another teacher curtly told me if I did not stop reading "sci-fi nonsense" I would "not amount to a hill of beans." Hmm. If she could see me now!

Writing Workshop didn't exist in my youth, but in fifth grade I had an amazing teacher who helped me learn to gain inspiration from a variety of sources, including images, and to organize my thinking and work in tangible way—a folder. She also introduced me to useful writing tools—special notebooks and notepads, colored pens and highlighters, sensibly ruled papers and soft No.2 pencils. Scissors and tape too! One day she showed me how to cut up the paragraphs in a draft and re-order them, rather than re-write all those paragraphs. She cut the draft apart and taped it back together in a new order. I was amazed! And, I loved my folders! Each one was a summation of my effort and a way to explain how a story or article came together, how it evolved. A few years later, Post-It Notes were introduced. I was in note-taking heaven! These little, yellow notes would stick to the inside of my folder. I could arrange and re-arrange them as needed. Whenever I had an idea for a piece of writing, or I found a good quote or factoid, I wrote it on a yellow stickie.

Today, though I am well-practiced and beyond amateur, I still use many of these practices as a professional writer. When I am invited to speak to students, I always remind them that writing is like playing sports. Sports and writing both require purpose, identity, tools, thinking, paying attention, learning, practice, coaching, more practice, more coaching, and a little competitive spirit if you want to win. They can relate to this.

Have fun with these picture prompts. I hope they inspire your students to write! I'd love to see any student work based on lighthouse picture prompts. Send them to elinor@uslhs.org. Thanks!