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Improving Writing Skills Through Autobiographical Application

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Dr. Anne F. Goiran-Bevelhimer

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Course Overview

Improving Writing Skills through Autobiographical Application is a graduate level course, exploring the value of writing autobiographical stories as a way to engage students in writing skills and strategies to meet the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects.

Most people record their stories visually through photo albums, either paper or digital, but few take the time to write the stories. Anyone looking at the photo albums either needs a narrator or the album has little meaning. This course offers you the opportunity to enliven your photo albums with stories, to create a living legacy for you and your family for generations to come.

Take what you learn about being a writer of autobiographical stories to the classroom as an effective writing strategy for engaging students in writing! Most students complain that they don't know what to write about, they don't have any ideas. Writing about our lives, our experiences, our thoughts and ideas is a constant rich, and available resource of ideas for writing. Authors, such as Tomie dePaola, John Steinbeck, Bill Bryson, Maya Angelou write from what they know; weaving their experiences and reflections in their narratives, informational texts and poetry. Gary Paulsen, author of the Newbery Award winner, *Hatchet*, a fictional story, is based on experiences from Paulsen's life. Gary wrote a sequel to *Hatchet* addressing the question, "Is it true?" in the informational book, *Guts*. Writing autobiographical stories is what writers do in a variety of forms. It is the source of authentic writing.

Gather your materials for your autobiographical writing project. Use what you have - photos, letters, family memorabilia. Conduct research through genealogical sites on the web. Enlist family members' help through anecdotal stories and interviews. Read and enjoy a variety of autobiographical genres: biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and creative nonfiction. Study the writer's craft and style of biographies or autobiographies. What do you notice that engages you as a reader? Use these ideas in your own writing. Explore writing strategies specific to writing autobiographical stories through outside reading of your choice. Use the books and stories as mentor texts for writing. One of my mentor texts is Lois Lowry's autobiographical book, *Looking Back*. She uses a vignette format for her autobiographical story coupled with a photo, much like a picture book. I also like Mary Borg's wonderful classroom and adult guide, *Writing Your Life*. While it can be overwhelming to compile a complete genealogy of family stories, Borg encourages writing your life stories one story at a time. I concur!

This course will suggest a variety of writing genres for you to experiment transforming personal narratives into clear and coherent writing to entertain and inform a variety of audiences. Practice the writing process through the stages of writing: brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising and editing. Have fun with revision through playing with writing techniques, like creating specific details or finding just the right word or rewrite

the story from a different point of view. In the end, you will create a minimum of 10 autobiographical stories from the 17 suggested topics in the text.

Apply what you learned about writing autobiographical stories to the classroom. Create a lesson plan that is useful to you. Synthesize the value of using autobiographical applications such as researching, reading and writing in the classroom as to encourage students in the writing process and implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts.

Finally, in lieu of an exam, evaluate the process of improving writing skills through autobiographical application in a short reflection essay. Reflect on how improving writing skills through autobiographical application helps you first improve your writing skills, then how it helps you as a teacher of writing.

Above all, I encourage you to make this a meaningful experience for you. This is your time to write your stories. This is your course. I am your guide and facilitator, but you are doing the work. Make the course work for YOU. To me, success is measured if you find yourself continuing to write your stories even after the course is over.

Use the text, outside reading and writing activities to complete the course work. A syllabus is available on www.collegecoursesonline.com

Text:

The “**Instructor’s Comments**” guide your work in the text. The text offers instruction for 17 autobiographical opportunities. Choose topics to write and submit a minimum of 10 stories of 1-2 pages each to fulfill the requirements of the autobiographical **Writing Project**. You may repeat a topic or you may want to experiment with a variety of topics. Use the text as a “workbook”. You do not need to “turn in “ your text when you complete the course. Use the narrative in the text and the directions in the **assignment** to write autobiographical stories.

Please feel free to contact the instructor with any ideas or modifications that would make this a more meaningful experience for you in writing the stories of your life.

Writing Project: Culminate the exercises in the text in a formal presentation, either print or digital, showing a minimum of 10 autobiographical narratives of a minimum of 1-2 pages each, using effective writing crafts, with appropriate details and sequence of events, prepared for a variety of audiences, showing a minimum of one autobiographical narrative polished for presentation, meaning ready for your scrapbook or to give as a gift. Your grade is based on the writing of the stories. It is not required to send photos with your stories, though it is always appreciated.

Classroom Application: Submit a written lesson plan / unit plan. (1-2 pages) that includes the following*:

- Instruction on gathering **sources** and sorting primary, secondary and tertiary sources of information on biographical history from a wide variety of resources: print, digital and oral interviews.
- Use of biographical stories **as mentor texts** for writing skills. Use autobiographical stories from personal collection, outside reading, and student examples. Highlight writing structure and crafts.
- Use technology and print sources to produce and publish autobiographical writings to share with others.

*If you are currently not in a classroom or prefer to modify the “application” exercise please feel free to make modifications that are meaningful to you. Here are some suggestions. Share stories with others on a blog site. Submit a story for publication to a magazine. Create a family tree on a web site like www.ancestry.com/ Discuss any other options you think would be more suitable for you with your instructor. Submit a description and evidence of your alternative exercise.

Outside Reading and Writing Assignments:

Choose Two Autobiographies/Biographies to read. Explore point of view, values, attitudes represented in autobiographical and biographical writing by reading a minimum of 2 autobiographies or biographical works. Feel free to use picture books, autobiographical or biographical magazine articles, books, and stories written by family members. How did the author use writer’s craft that engaged you as a reader? How could you use those ideas in your writing? Write a 2-4-page paper, summarizing content and writing styles and points of view. What did you learn that was valuable to writing autobiographical stories? How can these texts be used as mentor texts for your writing program? What skills, crafts and structures did you learn that you could use in your writing or teaching of writing? Suggested autobiographies and biographies are listed in a bibliography at the end of the text.

Review of Writing Strategies: Investigate outside sources on writing strategies specific to the genre of autobiographical or biographical writing. Choose a minimum of 1 book or 3 journal articles on the topic of autobiographical writing. Summarize findings, and focus the review on what you learned and could use in your own writing and teaching of writing. 2-4 pages. Suggestions of sources are mentioned at the end of this text.

Reflective Essay: Reflect on what you have gained from taking *Improving Writing Skills through Autobiographical Application* from a personal and professional point of view.

Autobiographical writing leads to integrating other people’s life histories with our own. Writing our life story helps us to recognize the uniqueness and universality of the human experience. Our stories matter; the good ones, the happy ones, the sad ones and the ones full of pain. Our stories are what build the character of our life. They offer lessons and

insights; give our life meaning and connection. We matter to our immediate family and to extended families we interact with and to the human family at large.

Write a personal and professional reflection on the value of writing autobiographical stories. Write a 5-page paper, commenting on the following topics. Focus on autobiographical writing as an authentic and practical form of writing that connects with other writing genres.

- Teacher as Writer: Appraise the value of improving your writing skills through writing autobiographical stories.
- Teacher of Writing: Reflect how writing autobiographical stories engages students in authentic writing and helps them improve their writing skills to meet grade level state or Common Core standards in ELA.
- Summarize the value of writing autobiographical stories in the scope of all genres of writing: narrative, informational writing and the genre of creative nonfiction.

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Introduction

Instructor's Comments:

A family story and how this course came to be. An introduction to *Improving Writing through Autobiographical Applications* and the value of writing the stories of your life.

How does writing autobiographical sketches improve writing skills?

My Dad was a wonderful storyteller. He would entertain us for hours with stories of his life; times he spent with his grandparents, the escapades of his career, and stories about ourselves. We would say, "Tell the one about our great grandmother when she lost control of the car and it hit an organ grinder; or tell the one when you were at that fancy dinner and you were showing some foreign dignitaries how the game of golf is played using a cream puff and the cream puff sailed across the room and disappeared in the cleavage of the lady's dress; or tell the one when you bought me a doll house for Christmas". Each time the story was told with slightly different detail, or accent or additions, but we all sat spellbound as he told his stories. Each time we encouraged him to write and record his stories, he resisted because of the overwhelming task. At 90 he passed away, having just begun the process of writing them down. Today we are left with the memories of his stories, an oral history as many families have, that will soon lose detail and relevance because they are not our experiences.

So many families lose their histories because the task of writing them down can be overwhelming and daunting. Rather than record a few stories there is a tendency to see the task as either all or nothing. This course is intended to help you overcome the overwhelming task and encourage you to have fun with your own life stories. In her autobiography, Grandma Moses tells us "I have written my life in small sketches". (*Grandma Moses: My Life History*, 1952.) I encourage you to do the same. Write in incidents, moments, and events. A whole history of your life written down in a readable form, though valuable, can be a full time occupation. As Ralph Fletcher says, "If you want to write about something big, write small." (*Live Writing*, 1999.) Write the small stories. Write the sketches.

What are the stories of your life? Memories of people, places and experiences are your stories. Your stories may be a captured moment in time, when a smell, a sight or an inspiration occurred to you, an epiphany. For me, the smell of chicken noodle soup brings back memories of being sick as a child and nurtured by my mother. Stories can be about extended perspectives over time. When I celebrated my 50th birthday, I gave myself a "Words of Wisdom" birthday party. I gathered several pictures of myself over the 5 decades and put them in an album and wrote a brief reflection of how I perceived myself over those 50 years. I focused on the idea of what "wisdom" I gained. The stories may be in the form of a diary, giving day-by-day accounts, or specific logs, such as a travel log, or a book log or a friendship log, or a business log. The stories may be in letter form,

narrative form, poems or may be a combination of memories as Myron Uhlberg writes in his picture book, *Flying Over Brooklyn*.

In my family, my brothers and I will tell the story about our Mother from very different points of view. We spent a lot of energy arguing who was right. I surmised that this is true of all people. Our perceptions of others are based on our experiences with them. Our interpretations of these experiences create a variety of stories and points of view. What we remember is more about us than it is about the other person. In a way, all stories are the “right “ story. So let there be many stories! Personal history is your **history**, told your way, from your perspective, from your experience. If there are different opinions, you may add them as different stories and leave the discrepancies to the reader of your stories. I remember a story written by a former student who wrote about going fishing from her point of view, and her Dad’s point of view. She told each event as from her point of view and her Dad’s point of view, which were often opposing! “Dad loved to fish. I loved being with Dad.”

You may not even know the whole story. For instance, if you are writing about an ancestor in your family you may have only shreds of information. Write from a speculative point of view. Wonder. Question. Research. Ask other people. The Internet is a research library in your home. Websites such as www.ancestry.com/ are very popular.

Look at photographs of your life and your family. The details in the photographs will give you a lot of information. Study the style of clothing. Use other sources to gather information about this era. Look at hairstyles, and facial expressions. This will help you identify the era and give information about values, work, and play. Studying photographs will allow you to make some educated guesses about character and way of life. Antique dealers can often tell you a lot about era. When my father died, the 4 children inherited some beautiful dinnerware, which consisted of plates. There were no cups or saucers, or bowls. There were enough plates that all of us received a considerable number. We lamented not having the complimentary dinnerware. When a plate broke in shipping, I went to an antique dealer, who told me that more than likely this was a set of dishes bought for large parties (pre paper plates) when people would serve themselves from a buffet line, and would not need bowls or cups and saucers! I could imagine my French family on lawns with beautiful turn of the century dresses and parasols, men in black suits with white starched shirts and top hats having a “picnic”, while a small ensemble played in the gazebo. Isn’t there a painting like that? Take the information you do have, and use it to build your stories.

Why write the stories? Write them to preserve history. Write them for your children. Write them for generations to come. Write them because they are great stories. Write them for you. Write them because you want to. Write for your own insights, for your own process, pleasure and enjoyment. Write for your purpose. Write because you have a voice that wants to be heard. Writing the stories has it’s own experience, it’s own life, and that gift will be yours. What other people get from them is their journey, not something you can control or predict. We the readers will read for our own purpose.

Reading autobiographical stories, we get a glimpse into another's life. We may share experiences but different points of view. We may gain an insight about our own life from reading about someone else's. Reading another's story allows us to find and make connections and to learn something, develop compassion, and see our own set of joys and problems in a new light. The writer of the stories and the reader of the stories have two separate experiences. So, write for you and leave the outcome and interpretation for others to gain their own interpretation.

END OF SAMPLE PAGES.

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