

WHAT'S YOUR AMBITION?

Students read an excerpt from Life on the Mississippi by Mark Twain and, using The Six Traits of Writing, compose an essay on a personal life ambition

TEACHER NOTES FOR DISCUSSION

In this activity, students will study Chapter Four from Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* as a piece of exemplary writing. Students can read it individually, as a class out loud, or you can read it to them. Point out some of the more descriptive passages. Discuss ambition and the idea expressed in the excerpt that ambitions change throughout life.

Students are directed to use the Six Traits of Writing to guide their discussion of what it takes to write an effective piece. The discussion notes they take will serve as the springboard for their pre-writing activity. In-class workshopping is recommended. You may even want the second draft to be written in class to encourage an open exchange of ideas with you and other classmates. Get peer groups to make written comments on classmates' papers so no one forgets good comments and suggestions for improved drafts.

A six-step assessment rubric is provided as a checklist for your students to use throughout their writing process.

Objectives

By the end of this activity, students should be able to:

- use prewriting strategies.
- evaluate their own and others' writing.
- use descriptive language.
- use grammatical and mechanical conventions in written work.
- demonstrate general skills and strategies of the reading process by identifying specific devices used by the author.
- actively participate in group discussions by playing a variety of roles.
- write a well developed, organized, and interesting essay.

RELATED STANDARDS AND BENCHMARKS

Language Arts

Standard 1. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process

- prewriting: uses a variety of prewriting strategies
- drafting and revising: uses a variety of strategies to draft and revise written
- editing and publishing: uses a variety of strategies to edit and publish written work
- evaluates own and others' writing
- writes expository compositions

Standard 2. Demonstrates competence in the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

- uses descriptive language that clarifies and enhances ideas
- uses paragraph form in writing
- uses a variety of sentence structures to express expanded ideas

Standard 3. Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions

Standard 5. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the reading process

Standard 6. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts

- identifies specific devices an author uses to accomplish his or her purpose
- reflects on what has been learned after reading and formulates ideas, opinions, and personal responses to texts

Standard 8. Demonstrates competence in speaking and listening as tools for learning

- plays a variety of roles in group discussions
- asks questions to seek elaboration and clarification of ideas
- listens in order to understand a speaker's topic, purpose, and perspective

Time Considerations

Instructor preparation:
one hour

Student activity:
four classes

WHAT'S YOUR AMBITION?

UNDERSTAND YOUR MISSION

In this activity you will use Mark Twain's writing as a model and the Six Traits of Writing as a guide to write an essay describing your life's ambitions.

LEARN THE LINGO

drayman	the one who drives a dray or a strong low cart for carrying heavy loads
freight pile	in this context, the cargo, mail, and parcels waiting to be loaded on the packet boat
gauge-cocks	primitive devices used to determine water levels in the boiler; issued from the cocks above the water level, hot water from the cocks below
gingerbread	carved and gilded decorations of a ship applied by sailors; especially of a gaudy type resembling frosting on such cookies
jack-staff	the forwardmost mast where the Navy Jack flag is flown
labboard	"larboard," former nautical usage for "port" (left) side of the ship, abandoned because of frequent confusion with "starboard" (right)
levee	an embankment to protect low-lying lands from flooding; a dike
mud clerks	assistant to the purser; the lowliest of clerical positions on a steamboat
packet	a boat that usually carried mail; short for "packet boat"
shingle-shavings	the product of whittling/carving on a wooden shingle
skids	planks or beams of wood placed in parallel lines (like railroad tracks) to facilitate the moving of cargo
texas deck	the next to the highest part on a steamboat, located immediately below the pilot house and used by the pilots for their living quarters

Gather Your Supplies

- Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (Chapter four)

WHAT'S YOUR AMBITION?

The Six Traits of Writing

Ideas and Content

Strong ideas and content in a paper hold the reader's attention because the writing is clear and focused. The details the writer includes are important because they enrich the central theme or story line. The writer uses experience and knowledge to clarify the message of the writing.

Organization

An organized writer uses logical, effective sequencing, good pacing, and strong transitions to link ideas, which serve to move the reader smoothly through the text. The beginning and ending of a piece should work in harmony. The introduction should be inviting to the reader and the conclusion should leave the reader thinking.

Word Choice

This writing trait emphasizes the use of words to convey the intended message in a precise, interesting, and natural way. The language can be simple, but it is used well. Strong verbs create vivid images and memorable moments. Words or phrases in the writing continue to linger in the reader's mind.

Word choice turns this kind of writing:

I like red because it is pretty. I think it is a nice color.

Into this kind of writing:

My most favorite color in the world just happens to be red. I think red is marvelous because it's dark and sometimes it makes you dizzy by looking at it too long.

Voice

Have you ever read something that was unsigned, yet you knew immediately who wrote it? If so, that writer exhibited strong voice. Voice is the trait that makes the writing sound like it belongs to the writer. Voice brings a topic to life. It causes the reader to feel something and become involved with the writer and the writing.

Sentence Fluency

Sentence fluency is the writing trait that deals with the flow of writing. When read aloud, the writing should have an easy flow and rhythm. Well-built sentences have strong and varied structure and vary in length. Each sentence should begin in such a way as to relate to and build upon the one before it. The writer considers the sound as well as the meaning of the words used.

Conventions

Standard writing conventions include grammar, capitalization, punctuation, word usage, spelling, and paragraphing. A good writer uses conventions effectively to enhance readability. A writer who uses good conventions allows the reader to focus on the content of the writing.

WHAT'S YOUR AMBITION?

CHART A COURSE FOR EXPLORATION

Read

Chapter Four, "The Boy's Ambition" from *Life on the Mississippi*.

Discuss

How does Twain employ the six traits of writing?

Pre-writing

Answer the following questions and record your responses:

1. Mark Twain wanted to be a steamboat pilot. What is your ambition?
2. Is this a popular ambition among your friends? Explain.
3. Was there a defining moment when you knew your ambition?
Describe that moment.
4. Picture yourself acting out your ambition. How are you dressed? How do you act? What activities are you engaged in from day to day?
5. Do you admire other people who are engaged in that activity? Who are these people? Describe them.
6. Ask someone in the class to picture you doing this. What activities does he/she see you engaged in?
7. Mark Twain tells us he had "transient ambitions." What were your ambitions five years ago? Have they changed? What factors contributed to the change?
8. Have you had a chance to meet anyone who lives out your ambitions?
9. Have you been able to indulge your ambition?

Write

Use the Six Traits of Writing and your answers from the pre-writing as the basis for your first draft of a descriptive story about your ambitions. Imagine you are engaged in your ambition. The story should be in the first person. Use your experiences from the past and ideas for the future. Remember, descriptive details, knowledge about the subject, and your imagination will make your story more interesting. The first draft should be two pages long.

Workshop

- Get together with three or four of your classmates and read each other's stories twice. The first time you read, look for G.U.M. errors (grammar, usage, mechanics). The second time you read it, evaluate the content.
- Does the story make sense? Are the ideas clear?
- Is it organized in a logical order?
- Did you feel involved in the story? Did you empathize with the author?
- Can you pick out strong verbs and descriptive passages?
- How do the sentences flow together? How about the paragraphs?
- What's missing?

Go Beyond

Read all of *Life on the Mississippi* and write a critique. Would you recommend this book to your friends? Is it topical today or is it out of fashion?

WHAT'S YOUR AMBITION?

- What stands out?
- Is it descriptive?
- Did you enjoy the story?
- Are the sentences all long or all short?
- What questions are left in your mind after reading the story?
- What other constructive suggestions can you make?

Rewrite

Using the feedback obtained from your peers, rewrite your story incorporating any necessary changes. Revise your story and hand it in to your teacher for more feedback.

Now revise for the last time. Remember, you will be assessed on how well you have incorporated the Six Traits of Writing into your piece.

Turn in

- pre-writing
- drafts
- comments
- final version

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	EXPERT	PROFICIENT	NOVICE
STORY REQUIREMENTS	<input type="checkbox"/> completed and turned in pre-writing, research, workshop, and final drafts	<input type="checkbox"/> lacks 1-2 elements	<input type="checkbox"/> incomplete
REVISE AND REVIEW	<input type="checkbox"/> effectively evaluated own and others' writing <input type="checkbox"/> received and gave good criticism	<input type="checkbox"/> received and gave criticism <input type="checkbox"/> evaluated own writing	<input type="checkbox"/> lacked revisions and reviews
CONTENT/IDEAS	<input type="checkbox"/> descriptions use precise words that provide visual images <input type="checkbox"/> quality details provide important information that goes beyond the obvious <input type="checkbox"/> details fit	<input type="checkbox"/> topic is defined <input type="checkbox"/> descriptions provide good details	<input type="checkbox"/> information unclear <input type="checkbox"/> lacks critical information
ORGANIZATION	<input type="checkbox"/> the organization enhances and highlights the central idea <input type="checkbox"/> sequencing is logical and effective <input type="checkbox"/> good transitions connect ideas	<input type="checkbox"/> the organization moves the reader through the text without undue confusion <input type="checkbox"/> sequencing is logical <input type="checkbox"/> transitions usually work well	<input type="checkbox"/> lacks a clear sense of direction <input type="checkbox"/> sequencing needs work <input type="checkbox"/> lack of organization makes it difficult to understand the main points
GRAMMAR, USAGE, MECHANICS (G.U.M.)	<input type="checkbox"/> no G.U.M. errors	<input type="checkbox"/> any grammatical or usage problems do not interfere with meaning <input type="checkbox"/> most words are spelled correctly <input type="checkbox"/> correct paragraph form is used <input type="checkbox"/> only moderate editing needed	<input type="checkbox"/> multiple mistakes in grammar, mechanical conventions, and spelling are present <input type="checkbox"/> extensive editing is required
UNITY	<input type="checkbox"/> well chosen sentences and details	<input type="checkbox"/> omit irrelevant details and sentences <input type="checkbox"/> add telling details	<input type="checkbox"/> difficult to comprehend <input type="checkbox"/> go through and clarify points with telling details
NARRATIVE	<input type="checkbox"/> story captures listeners' attention <input type="checkbox"/> told in first person	<input type="checkbox"/> story is good and somewhat interesting <input type="checkbox"/> mostly told in first person	<input type="checkbox"/> needs details and interest added <input type="checkbox"/> not consistently told in first person

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REFERENCES

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