Simple Story Starters

#1 Clustering

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Clustering Definition

Clustering is a writing exercise that taps into the creative, right hemisphere of the brain. As used here, clustering is based on WRITING THE NATURAL WAY by Gabriele Lusser Rico (Putnam Publishing, 1983) although there are other sources and names for this process. Essentially, the purpose of clustering is to "jump start" your creativity. You start with a single word. Then you write as many associated words as you can think of. When you finish the initial steps, you have a story "word palette" that gives you multiple choices with which to create - much like an artist's palette offers artistic options.

I have added rhyming and opposite elements to give even more creative options to your "word palette."

According to Ms. Rico, the goal of clustering is to "wake up" your creative, right brain. To this end, speed is actually quite helpful. Don't take too long to linger over each step. Get ideas out fast before the analytical left brain can criticize!

Sadly, creative thinking is not acknowledged by Common Core standards. However, once your class has stimulated their creative minds and written their stories, you may apply Common Core standards to analyze:

CCSS 1: Key Ideas & Details
CCSS 2: Craft & Structure
CCSS 3: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas
CCSS 4: Range of Reading & Level of Text Complexity

Since students are now talking about stories and text that they helped create, they will be more engaged and open to use that text to learn the grammar and language arts skills appropriate to their grade level.
Clustering Overview

The process of clustering is easy, fun and engaging. Because it only requires a single word at a time from students, it is accessible for even reluctant and special needs students. Again, don't think too long. Do each step as quickly as possible. Begin by modeling the strategy for your class. Then allow them to create on their own.

1. Start with a blank whiteboard (or whatever media you use in class.) Ask your class to volunteer a single word. Write the word in the CENTER of the page and CIRCLE it.

2. Ask students to volunteer one word that they ASSOCIATE with the word in the circle. Draw lines from the circled word, then write the associated words they just suggested. Go until you have between 6 - 10 words.

3. Ask students to volunteer RHYMING words for the words they just suggested. Again, draw lines and write the 6 - 10 new, rhyming words.

4. Now ask students to volunteer OPPOSITE words. Repeat drawing lines and writing 6 - 10 new, opposite words.

5. Take a quick moment to study all the words on your whiteboard. Start stringing words together to create your story.

6. Now allow students 2-3 minutes to complete each of the above steps on their own.
For younger students, you may use the following template to fill in the blanks with words from your cluster:

Once upon a time, there was a ___________

Every day ______________________

Then one day ______________________

Because of that ______________________

Now every day ______________________
1. One Word

Tree
2. Linked Words

- Tree
  - branch
  - leaf
  - roots
  - water
  - fruit
  - nuts
3. Rhyming Words

- ranch
- thief
- leaf
- sea
- nuts
- shuts
- cute
- fruit
- water
- daughter
- bee
- roots
- boots

Tree
5. Putting It Together

After studying your "word palette" for a few moments. You can begin to string the words together to form an original story like:

Once there was a magic **tree**.
It had a special golden **leaf** that **opens** into a **cute** **fruit**.
Whoever ate the fruit became instantly cuter.
People came by land and **sea** to buy the magic fruit.
Then one night a **thief** came and stole a cute fruit.
But when he ate it, he didn't become cuter.
He grew uglier.
The magic in the fruit only increased what was inside a person.
The **police** soon found the thief.
They **shut** him in a cell with no mirror, because he couldn't even bear to look at himself.
Now everyone knows not to steal a cute fruit from the magic tree.
6. Finishing Up

Now that you have modelled the clustering process for your students, allow them time to create on their own. Give them 2-3 minutes to complete each step 1-4. Then give them 10 minutes to complete their story for the last step.

Before they begin, you may even add specific instructions to reinforce current topics of study. For instance you may ask them to include several specific vocabulary words into their story. Or you may ask them to work on proper capitalization, or subject/verb agreement, etc.

When they have finished their stories, you may implement CCSS standards to evaluate their progress.

ALWAYS begin by praising their creative efforts. If they know you care about their story, they'll care about making them better through proper grammar and structure.

Above all, allow your students to have FUN with this activity! Encourage outlandish stories. Reward creativity. The more fun students have, the more eager they will be to repeat the activity and incorporate the skills of proper writing and sentence structure.