

## **Literary Models for Autobiographical Writing, Part 1: Finding Frameworks for Personal Narratives**

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Traditionally, literature has been the most common way of teaching literacy and writing in most cultures, with U.S. pedagogical strategies somewhat of an exception. Here, in the 19th century, composition began to be taught as a separate skill from humanities subjects, and authentic non-fiction materials begin to supplant purely literary or belles lettres models for writing students to imitate. As a result of this two-track authentic and literary approach, ambivalence about literature in composition courses developed even in courses for native speakers. To this day, literature in ESL writing is a stepchild.

This century-and-a-half-long distinction between literature for moral and intellectual improvement and writing for utilitarian purposes still has force, and discourages experimentation with more modern approaches to literature in writing courses. Yet, many ESL students find literature, even in a foreign language, far more familiar and congenial than do native English speakers. As a result, they are willing to struggle with a higher level vocabulary and a more complex sentence structure in literature than they will in an expository essay. In general, language skills abroad are frequently taught in conjunction with content courses, usually literature, rather than as skills or arts courses. As anyone who has studied a foreign language at the advanced level knows, literature provides insights into culture, mores, and manners very difficult to convey by other means. The American pattern of teaching writing skills to ESL students, in contrast, is to begin with the students' personal experiences, to have them write chronological and descriptive essays about their lives, and to explore the different developmental modes through biography. We contend that a combination of these two methods, a combination of the literary with the autobiographical can be a highly effective tool for teaching composition skills.

Our focus, in particular, is on the plethora of multicultural experience novels, short stories, and essays now readily available in a variety of multicultural readers and their value in providing ESL students at the advanced or college level with models for distancing their personal biographical experiences. These stories may at first seem inappropriate for an ESL audience because, typically, they focus on characters who have left behind or lost one culture and are being assimilated or have become totally assimilated into a culture different from that of their parents. Yet the experiences of culture shock, of personal change from contact with the Other, and of a dual vision that is the product of seeing two cultures as an outsider are ones ESL students at some stage in their personal history have shared.

### **Literacy models for biographical topics**

The following list suggests only a few of the literary models available and the biographical topics they quite easily inspire:

1. Amy Tan's "A Pair of Tickets" from *Joy Luck Club*: (anthologized in Jerome Beaty and Paul Hunter's *New Worlds of Literature*, Norton, 1994), a voyage of discovery as an American youth comes to appreciate and value her Chinese heritage while on a trip to Hong Kong, then Shanghai to meet two sisters she has not known she had; she thinks of the experience as going home for the first time.

**Paper topic:** a learning experience that is tied to travel, with changes in location reflecting changes in attitude or understanding or a description of identity tied to place.

2. Gary Soto's "Like Mexicans" (*New Worlds of Literature*): "My grandmother gave me bad advice and good advice when I was in my early teens. For the bad advice, she said that I should become a barber because they made good money and listened to the radio all day . . . . For the good advice, she said that I should marry a Mexican girl. 'No Okies, hijo' -- she would say."

**Paper topic:** advice from parents, grandparents, or friends that one reinterprets with time. In Soto's story the young man realizes that what his grandmother really means is to marry someone from a working class background, so his Japanese girlfriend with a home and family situation like his is "Mexican" by his grandmother's definition, as the broken down cars in the yard and kittens climbing on the kitchen doorscreen confirm for him.

3. Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" from *Woman Warrior* (*New Worlds of Literature*): "You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you . . .".

**Paper topic:** a family secret and its personal meaning or on the discovery and understanding of a family secret.

4. *A Day in the Life of the Gonzalez Family* a tape and series of interlocking readings by Carol Van Duzer and Miriam Burt (Delta Publishing).

**Paper topic:** "A day in the life of \_\_\_\_\_" (a person in the career the student is interested in/ an American college student/ a new arrival/ etc.). This topic offers multiple direction possibilities.

5. Le Ly Hayslip's "Rice Farming in Vietnam" from *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), anthologized in Carol Verburg's *Ourselves Among Others* (St. Martin's Press, 1994).

**Paper topic:** family hardships or ties to the land that have been changed (a way of life that has been lost -- for good or for ill).

6. Vo Thi Tam's "From Vietnam, 1979" or Rasmey Sam's "Cambodian Boys Don't Cry" (anthologized in Janet Madden-Simpson and Sara Blake's *Emerging Voices; A Cross-Cultural Reader*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1990) both historically centered stories of terrifying and horrible personal experiences.

**Paper topic:** an unpleasant or even horrible personal, family, or national experience.

7. Chenjerai Hove's poem "You Will " (Stuart Hirschberg's *The Many Worlds of Literature*, Macmillan, 1994) about bittersweet memories of Zimbabwe or Cathy Song's poem "Lost Sister" about her Chinese roots or Lorna Cervantes's nostalgic poem "Freeway 490" about the home she left behind (the last two in *New Worlds of Literature*).

**Paper topic:** things forgotten -- from home, from childhood, from family life -- or on things lost (perhaps in the form of a poem).

8. Lee's short story of an American Dad proving to be a Korean Dad in "Two Dads" (*New Worlds of Literature*)

**Paper topic:** the discovery of another, unfamiliar side to one's parent: "Two Dads" or "Two Moms."

9. Countee Cullen's poem "Heritage" (*New Worlds of Literature*), Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (Vintage, 1997), or Robbie Sethi's short story "Grace" (*New Worlds of Literature*)

-- all of which are about cultural tensions and characters torn between who they are expected to be and who they really are.

**Paper topic:** cultural tensions/ conflicting expectations/ clashing assumptions illustrated through a personal incident or a paper on "What my country/ the country of my ancestry is to me" or "What home is to me".

10. Selections from Richard Rodriguez's *Aria: Memoirs of a Bilingual Childhood* (anthologized in *New Worlds of Literature*), about the tensions caused by the need to learn a second language and the security of a family language.

**Paper topic:** language decisions and how they change one's life, on how learning English affects one's present or changes relationships with family, friends, or community or could change one's future.

11. Selections from Emma Goldman's essay "Was My Life Worth Living?" (from *Harper's Magazine* online 2000 from 1934 issue) about her lifelong distrust of institutions and governments: "On coming to America I had the same hopes as have most European immigrants and the same disillusionment . . . . The immigrant without money and without connections is not permitted to cherish the comforting illusion that America is a benevolent uncle who assumes a tender and impartial guardianship of nephews and nieces." Any immigrant essay built on metaphors would work here.

**Writing topic:** a paragraph that creates a metaphor to describe personal American experiences. Gary Althen has a wonderful discussion of metaphors used by teachers, administrators, and American academics in general to describe the role of the international student in the American

university and community. Our students have delighted in describing themselves as, for example, a duck in a chicken yard or a fish out of water or describing their role in American universities as that of a teacher of geography, culture, and history, a valuable resource for the American classroom, or a diplomat abroad, and so on.

12. Mark Salzman's "Teacher Wei" (*New Worlds of Literature*) contrasts attitudes about privacy and individualism and explores conflicting views of the role of a teacher in Eastern versus Western cultures.

**Paper topic:** the conflict between personal expectations of teacherly behavior based on past experiences and the student's experiences in the American classroom (perhaps how classroom behavior clashes with past experiences, how teachers teach differently, and so on). Papers on conflicting ideas about personal space and what is private and what is public could be both entertaining and enlightening.