Educators for Fair Consideration (E4FC)

Creative Writing Program

Begun in Summer 2010, E4FC’s Creative Writing Program teaches undocumented students to share their stories through creative writing. The program creates a safe space and nurturing community that allows students to honor their immigration stories, grow and heal through their writing, and share their work with broader audiences. These students shed light on what it is like to grow up as undocumented young adults. They talk about not being able to return to their homelands, about wanting to be accepted as Americans, and about the fear of living in the shadows.

Visit www.thingsillnever SAY.org for more stories by undocumented students.
This packet is designed for individuals who are interested in incorporating creative writing in their classrooms, groups or other relevant spaces. Creative writing is a journey, a process of discovery - it can be messy at times, but it can also be very rewarding. Here you will find some resources to help get you started!

It's important to note that if you plan to engage students or other individuals in this writing process, you should have prior experience in this area. It can be very detrimental to unearth difficult memories through the writing process, if they are not dealt with appropriately. Remind your students to only enter spaces and memories that they feel comfortable with. Above all - they should have fun with it!

Using Prompts to Generate Writing
The following prompts are excellent for surfacing content. Give your students 10 to 15 minutes to do a freewrite on one of these prompts. Further work will need to be done with revision and editing in order to arrive at a "polished" piece.

Writing Prompts

- **Childhood:** Remember/imagine yourself at the age when you left your country – maybe it was too young for concrete memories, so imagine your way into that little person. What was your life like? Where did you live? Who with? What did your family want for you?

- **Letters:** Think of someone, some place, some thing left behind. Write a letter to that person/place/thing. What do you remember about he/she/it? Do you miss he/she/it? Is there more you wished you knew about it? What news of you & your life now do you want to pass back to he/she/it?

- **Letter to Yourself:** Write a letter from yourself now to the child-self just before immigration. What do you want to tell that child about what is to come? What reassurances, truths, warnings, encouragement might you want to pass on?

- **Suitcase Exercise:** Write a list of things you brought to the US with you. This could be an actual list from memory, or an imagined list – things you wish you had brought, for example. The list should include concrete objects, but may also include emotions, dreams, memories etc. As always – be as specific, concrete & vivid as you can to bring the objects/states of mind to life.

- **From Image to Text:** Write a series of autobiographical sketches/vignettes inspired by photographs that are collected in one place, for one occasion, and in this way create a scrapbook in words. Or, write a series of autobiographical vignettes inspired by photographs from different times in your life.
• **Dear Mr. President**: Write a letter or series of letters to a public figure (President Obama, Newt Gingrich, Lady Gaga…) that you would never send. Include personal experiences and information that wouldn’t usually be “public.”

• **I Want to Know Why**: Write a list of at least 10 things that fall into the category of things not known, not understood. Important – give yourself a constraint to avoid abstraction or “large” topics. For example, you might limit the things not known to events of the past month, or to family encounters. Do a freewrite based on one of the list items.

• **I Don’t Know Why I Remember**: Think of things that have stuck in your memory, but for no obvious reason. (Not the “important” or big events – go for the small moments.) Render them precisely on the page using vivid, concrete details. Don’t try to explain why these moments stuck with you, just put the reader right there in the moment.
Another effective way of surfacing content is to gain inspiration from other published works. Here are two examples of using published works to inspire writing.

My Name

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican record my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother’s name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would’ve liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn’t marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That’s the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn’t be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister’s name—Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.
My Name Brings Me to a Notion of Splendor

No one could pronounce it
without mutilating spindling tearing
even my best friends would shrug halfway giving up
and always the long pause on the first day of class
after Dillon or Dinsmore or Dix
every face turning to me even though
my name was not yet called and mangled
in every probable way oh why wasn't I
Jenkins or Jennings something safer
and mannerly anything but this minefield
of letters set against each other sticking
in the mouth as if the fault were mine
as if no other name were as impenetrable
not Knaebels or Steinbacher not Stoltzfus
or Schmidt how did they come to be
so inconspicuous who were they
playing kickball tracing maps of America
doing long division on the blackboard
as easily as if they were walking
across the street in their sleep no worries
no boundaries to trip them up no Mr. Bielfield
telling my mother I'll straighten him out
what was so crooked? even my past life
seemed now a dark labyrinth of passages
my grandfather standing on the wharf in Alexandria
waving goodbye and me on the great ship
waving back not knowing where the prow
would finally lodge on what rock what piece
of exquisitely verdant beach who knew
I would have to unravel the tangle
of circumstances that put me in a small
landlocked lumber town in Pennsylvania
face to face now with Joe Schunk and having
to explain the D was silent easy enough
to say once you got the hang of it but Joe didn't
and it was five or six fast blocks of losing him
down Hawthorne and across to Pine my heart
thumping and beads of sweat glistening
on my arms before I heard Louisa Richards
suddenly call out DeeJay to me from her porch
in a way that stopped me in my tracks
because nothing had ever sounded so good
and nothing came easier than to walk
up the stairs and sit down by her
and begin telling her who I was.

Gregory Djanikian
So I Will Till the Ground
Carnegie Mellon University Press
**Piece inspired by “My Name” and “My Name Brings Me to a Notion of Splendor”.

**Name**

It is always prefaced with, “I know I’m going to butcher this.” Almost always a pause. There, that didn’t sound half bad.

JIR-A-YUT. With each syllable, I see the debt collectors waiting outside the gates of our home in Thailand. My parents’ faces displayed agony as they fought over what to do and where to go next. It seemed like there was no escape.

JIR-A-YUT. With each syllable, I return to that apartment in Milpitas where my brother, sister, and I crammed into the one bedroom while my parents slept on the floor in the living room—right next to the kitchen and dirty shoes.

JIR-A-YUT. With each syllable, I relive each time I had to ask others to repeat themselves as I tried to absorb and use as much English as I could.

JIR-A-YUT. With each syllable, I call my mom’s gynecologist to describe the sharp pains she still had months after surgery. There was no other Thai translator.

JIR-A-YUT. With each syllable, I remember why I must step forward. More than just a remnant of my past, I cling to my name through the most desperate of times. I see the goals I have yet to reach—they are in sight. I know how to change this. I will get papers, I will get scholarships, I will graduate, and I will become a doctor.

Sonrisas

I live in a doorway
between two rooms, I hear
quiet clicks, cups of black
coffee, click, click like facts
budgets, tenure, curriculum,
from careful women in crisp beige
suits, quick beige smiles
that seldom sneak into their eyes.

I peek
in the other room señoritas
in faded dresses stir sweet
milk coffee, laughter whirls
with steam from fresh tamales
sh, sh, mucho ruido,
they scold one another,
press their lips, trap smiles
in their dark, Mexican eyes.

—Pat Mora
Two Masks

I am a student by day

I spend hours in lecture halls
“Nadia, did you understand what he was saying?”
“No, I was having a hard time staying awake.”

I’m a waitress at night

I spend hours taking orders
“Hi! My name is Ana, I’ll be taking care of you today, can I start you off with anything to drink?”
“I’d like to order water with lemons, oh and can you bring sugar packets as well?”

I study and I take exams
“that test was so unfair!”
“I know! That question wasn’t in his notes!”

I handle customer complaints
“How did everything come out with your food?”
“My meat was undercooked. These mashed potatoes are cold. I need to talk to the manager.”

I dream like the others of the things I’ll do when I’m done
“Nadia what are you doing when you graduate?”
“I’m taking the MCATs, applying to medical school, trying to look for a new job”

Knowing deep down this is not within my reach

And like my coworkers at the restaurant I dream of the day I can get a new job
“If you could have any job in the world what would it be?”
“I’d like to be a doctor, work for myself—anything that’s not waitressing!”

Knowing deep down this is not within my reach.