

# Ideas to Promote Student Writing in U.S. History

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In this computer age students must be given encouragement to write with flair and style. Care must be taken to guarantee students don't simply download a paper from the Internet. Different activities may be utilized to make writing more enjoyable and original. It is essential to provide students with opportunities to share their skills with their classmates. Often it is beneficial to have students work in groups where they may bring out the best in each other. Motivation is enhanced when students realize they will be sharing their end product with the rest of the class. Patience is essential to guarantee students the proper amount of time for editing and publication.

The teacher may provide guidance through an outline of the procedure to be followed. Students must be given a great deal of flexibility to allow for individual differences and levels of enthusiasm. An evaluation instrument must be provided so the entire class can participate. Most often teacher input is essential to determine historical accuracy, but be sure to consider creativity and originality in the final analysis.

- 1. Letter Writing** - Students assume the identity of a person in history. They write a letter to a contemporary who responds. Each student may write a couple letters. Examples: An American soldier in France during WWI writes to his mother or girl friend back home. A member of the St. Louis City Council writes a letter to James Eads inquiring about building a bridge across the Mississippi River.  
The possibilities are endless and the students must do the research to formulate the letters. This is also a good exercise to teach proper letter construction.
- 2. Evaluate a Video** - Students are given a form to follow prior to viewing a video. The form will question content, but also provide students with an opportunity to analyze statements made and to make judgments about critical decisions. In the conclusion, the writer must make a connection between the historical content of the video and life in America today. Example: How does the concept of Imperialism during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century relate to American foreign affairs today? Another possibility: Compare the unrest in the Balkans prior to WWI with the situation in the Middle East today.
- 3. Write a Short Story** – Select a period of time from history and have students author a short story describing how various events of that period influenced the life of their main character. Example: A boy who graduated from high school during the 1930's and worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps in northern Wisconsin. In the process of writing the short story the student must do research about life in the CCC during the 1930's.
- 4. Keep a Journal** – Assume the role of a person in history and keep a record of daily or weekly events. Example: A pioneer traveling west on the Oregon Trail keeps an accurate weekly Journal. This project may be integrated with a geography activity.
- 5. Postcards** – Students will travel to various sites during different periods in history and send postcards to classmates explaining their role in historical events. Through the use of computer technology these can be very convincing. The teacher may furnish a list of possible events or the students may develop their own.
- 6. Historical Interview** – Students conduct an interview with a person from history. They write questions, record answers, and provide personal impressions of people with whom they interacted. This may be done live, on tape, or in written form. If done live or on tape, insist on a script in advance.
- 7. Newspaper** – A number of students work together to design a newspaper from a critical year in history. Student groups will then exchange papers with each other. Example: The major news items of 1868 will be exchanged with the highlights of 1968. Students may compare and contrast, then report to the rest of the class.
- 8. Song or Poem** – Students will author an original song or poem representing a specific period in history. This may be combined with a poster or artistic perception of the time. Example: An early rock and roll song coupled with drawings or designs from the 1950's.
- 9. Job Description** – Students will design job descriptions for a variety of people in American history. Classmates then may be asked to determine the identities of the people described. Examples may include Eli Whitney, Gertrude Ederle, Martin Luther King, etc. Another twist is to prepare resumes and interview for jobs.
- 10. In the Picture** – Students are given a large picture depicting some aspect of history. They are instructed to write several paragraphs describing the scene portrayed. In the description the student must include a personal recollection of what was taking place when the photo was made. Example: A person viewing the driving of the "Golden Spike."