

'Writing in Location' at the Charles Dickens Museum

A creative writing resource for visiting teachers and their students

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Preparation...

8-15 mins.

A WARM-UP

Ask your students to list any thoughts that occur to them whenever they see or hear the name **Dickens**. Their list can include ideas, associations, memories – anything they like. When they have more than 1 or 2 entries each, compare and discuss. What do their combined lists reveal?

Activity 1 [easy]

35-70 mins.

WATCH THAT TITLE!

1. Get your students to generate a substantial list of **emotions** and other **abstract nouns** (see below for a typical case). Provide a few priming examples, then ask them to offer an emotion they've felt today. Make sure *everyone* is jotting down all the entries as you go.

Anger	Jealousy	Happiness	Regret	Hope
Falling in love	Pride	Fear	Confidence	Respect
Loneliness	Curiosity	Friendship	Boredom	Surprise...
Crime	War	History	Advice	News
Duty	Memory	Decay	Luck	Logic
Fate	Justice	Sleep	Death	Time ...

2. Soon, you'll send the students into the house to explore. Before you do, **run through** instructions (a) and (b) [below] to make sure everyone knows what they'll be doing...
 - (a) **Working alone**, they find an object in the house that draws their attention, something **simple** – an inkwell, a desktop, a jacket button. They make that their **title** on a fresh piece of paper.
 - (b) Under this title, they describe their object **plainly**, using **short sentences** and all the senses. They should focus on physical and practical qualities: the basics of what the object is and what it does. They must not mention the item by name, but can include all observations, *however banal or obvious*. The crucial thing is to build a list of punchy statements about their object, like this...

THE INKWELL

It's a hole – a tiny container.
It can be black or blue.
We don't need it any more.
Don't dip your thumb in it.
You don't want it too full...

THE DESKTOP

It has a grain to it.
It smells of varnish –
old and overused.
There are deep marks in it:
someone's initials...

A JACKET BUTTON

It is shiny and smooth.
It can be of metal or plastic.
Without it, you look untidy.
It's made in a factory.
Once lost, it's hard to match...

Read out one or two of the above, so they get the idea. Remind them to ask for help if they get stuck. Help any individuals who are confused, or struggling, to extend their lists.

3. When everyone has something, gather them back into a group. This is the key moment: ask them to **cross out the title** and **replace it** with any of the abstract words from '1'. Suggest that they choose new titles that give strange or interesting effects (e.g. below).

THE INKWELL LUCK

It's a hole – a tiny container.
It can be black or blue.
We don't need it any more.
Don't dip your thumb in it.
You don't want it too full...

THE DESKTOP PRIDE

It has a grain to it.
It smells of varnish –
old and overused.
There are deep marks in it:
someone's initials...

A JACKET BUTTON SLEEP

It is shiny and smooth.
It can be of metal or plastic.
Without it, you look untidy.
It's made in a factory.
Once lost, it's hard to match...

4. Ask volunteers to **read out** their results from '3'. Praise any strong effects that arise!

[Optional...] Discuss **editing**. Will they leave their piece alone, or try to improve it? Would the poem build more convincingly if the lines were put in a different order? Does it need anything cut, or added? Perhaps they feel some lines don't *really* work under the new title (how can lost sleep be 'hard to match'?) – or are these 'wrong' bits some of the best of all?

DICKENS'S DREAM

Begin by looking at the Robert Buss painting on display in the house. It depicts Dickens in reverie in his study at Gad's Hill, imagining his characters.

Your students will explore the museum in a different way from *Activity 1*. This time, they find any item (physical or story-based) that is somehow mysterious or enticing to them: a **character**, a snippet of **biography**, an **artefact**. They then place that item in a dream, or in a surreal situation: i.e. they let it lead them into a short piece of **dream-like writing**. This might involve (as dreams often do) their own memories or associations. Stress that what they write doesn't have to 'make sense'.



Dickens's Dream: RW Buss (1875) [unfinished painting]

When everyone has a starting idea, however rudimentary, call them back into the **group area**.

Some students will have images or scenes they can follow up easily; others might be struggling, or will be lost as to what to do next. So, before asking them to work alone on developing their individual pieces, use the group situation to **assist those who are stuck**. Get a volunteer or two to read out their initial idea, then pose a few **simple questions** that help to move that idea along.

For instance, if the scenario is a girl sitting at a piano in a white dress, you might ask: what time of day is it? What season? What is the room like? Who else lives in the house? Does she have brothers and sisters? What tune is she trying to play, and why? Get this process started, then spur the group to chip in with their own questions. Anyone who was stuck should now see how they can easily flesh out a simple initial thought into a more extended opening scene (for a poem, story or play). Once everyone is on board, and thinking more freely, give them **time to write**.

Note. Some students find this exercise a little more 'demanding' than *Activity 1*, especially to begin with; even so, it should still be possible to help them to develop their initial stimulus into a more substantial beginning. The point is that they pluck up the courage (as writers often must) to set off into the unknown under an impetus they haven't fully grasped, rather than simply settle for destinations already clearly mapped out for them.

Activity 3 [advanced]

40-70 mins.

BIT by BIT

Authors like Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy published much of their work in instalments. Dickens was also a very 'visual' writer. This exercise explores both issues. Be sure to run through the instructions (below) with your students **before** you send them off to write; also, if necessary, discuss with a member of staff which parts of the house are accessible and suitable for this activity.

1. **In pairs**, students find a good 'starting place' in the house for some writing.
2. Together, they **write down a few sentences or lines** inspired by the look and feel of that particular spot. They should begin with the reality of what they can **see** (in general, or in particular). They label this '**Instalment 1**'.
3. After a few minutes, they **move on** to a second location. Here, they write a bit more (again, they use the new setting for this). NB: this new writing **needn't** be related to what they wrote before. They label this '**Instalment 2**'.
4. They **continue** to gather instalments, until you call them back (leave 15-30 mins. for what comes next).

In the group, ask 1 or 2 volunteers to **read out** what they have. Facilitate the rest of the group to suggest ways in which the separate chunks of writing *might* be linked up. If all the pieces seem very much unrelated, find some means (however strange or unusual) to connect just **two** of the instalments.

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