

Writing

AN AUTHOR'S EXPERTISE MATTERS

Lesson steps

1. Inform students they are launching a new unit on [insert unit topic here].
2. Explain that they will be writing about topics they know a lot about.
3. Prompt students to take a “thought journey” of their everyday lives, guiding them to picture certain situations and asking them specific questions to help them uncover their areas of expertise.
4. Using this guided practice, teach students to reflect on the areas in their lives where people come to them for more information.
5. Give students time to list or freewrite about topics they are known for during the rest of the class period.

What I Say to Students

As many of you know, we are beginning new writing pieces. But these pieces aren't just any kind of writing. These are pieces that are meant to teach and share knowledge with the world: your knowledge—those things you personally know so much about. Some people call these *nonfiction writing*. Others call them *informational*. But whatever you call them, they involve writing that is meant to teach.

I can see from some of your faces that you are thinking that I couldn't possibly be talking about you; after all, you're kids. How can you possibly be experts? But, it's true. Every one of us is an expert on something. Sometimes, we can be experts on something big and academic sounding—like maybe something we've studied in school or in a class, like photosynthesis or algebra. Or maybe it's something you love to do in your spare time, a sport you play, an art you make, or a responsibility you take on.

PURPOSE

Students learn that nonfiction writers often launch their writing projects off of their own knowledge base. They begin to think of and appreciate their areas of expertise, which could be the foundation for pieces of writing.

LESSON INTENDED FOR

- Personal expertise books
- Content-specific books or reports
- Oral reports
- Research reports
- Students at a wide range of levels

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A piece of chart paper, a document camera, or another place visible to all where you can write the guided practice questions you will use
- Students' writing notebooks (optional)

I'm going to ask you to go on a little "thought journey" with me. I'm going to ask you to take a tour of your life. You might want to close your eyes or stare at the ceiling or even jot things in your notebook as I do this. I will call out some ideas and questions to think about as you explore the areas in your life where you carry a lot of knowledge.

I'd like you to picture your home or someplace else you spend a lot of time—whole days. Can you picture it? **For me it would be my apartment, where I spend most of my time when I'm not in school.** Once you have it in your mind, look around. What do you see? One question you might ask yourself is this:

What activities do I do well here?

I know one thing I do really well is bake. Actually, I'm not just a good baker, but I'm also a really good candymaker. And I know that my friends and family often ask me for my recipes or to sample my treats. I see a few of you smiling—that's fantastic! I should add that if you get a good idea for writing, go ahead and jot it in your notebook if you'd like.

Now, let's continue our tour. I'd look you to look up and down and all around—on shelves and walls and under chairs, desks, and beds. What do you see? One question you might ask yourself is this:

What objects do I use all the time that I use well?

I know one thing I see in my mind's eye is my Metrocard because I take a bus or subway almost every day. This reminds me that people often ask me for subway tips or directions. I think I could definitely say that I'm a little famous with the people I know for how much I travel and how well I get around the subway.

Let's try another idea. You could answer this question in your mind's eye or else by looking in real life. I want you to look at yourself—the clothes you are wearing, your hands, your knees, and your hair. Ask yourself this question:

What do I notice about myself that says something about what I'm known for?

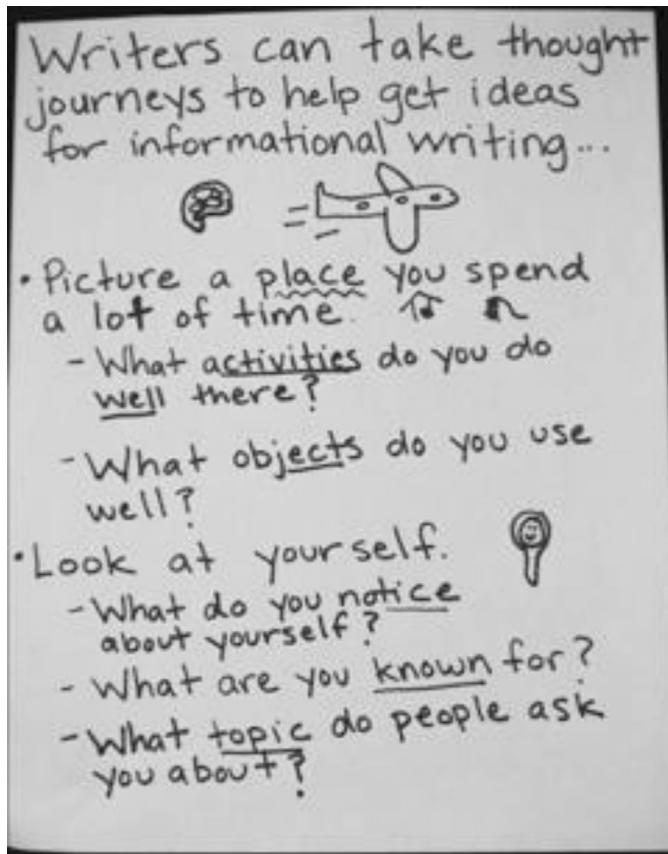
It could be that you have a scar on your knee that reminds you of your favorite skateboard trick. It could be the sparkles on your fingernails that remind you of how much you are into fashion. It could even be the shoes that you're wearing—either the style or the scuffs or even the kind of dirt they have accumulated in the grooves.

Now, let's try one more question—just in case it's helpful. Picture a conversation you had recently with friends or family. If you can, especially

picture a conversation where people were coming to you for advice, or they were asking you questions. This could be grown-ups in your life or cousins or even little brothers and sisters. Then, ask yourself this:

What topic do the people in my life most ask me about? What do they see me as an expert in?

A few of you might have noticed that you are getting a lot of ideas—more than you could possibly keep going in your head. You might want to use this opportunity to list your possible informational book ideas in your notebook. On the other hand, some of you might feel very different. You don't have a ton of ideas. You have one or two that are burning you up. You know what you want to write about now. If that's the case, you can take this class time to write long about the topic that is at the forefront of your mind right now as a sort of rehearsal to see if this topic really is the one you want to work on.



Thought journey chart