Writing a Creative Non-Fiction Story

Activity Based on

Gopher to the Rescue! A Volcano Recovery Story

I. Introduction:

Using *Gopher to the Rescue! A Volcano Recovery Story* as a model, with this activity students will research an animal that was a supporting member in *Gopher's* cast of characters. After modeling the process and writing a story cooperatively as a class, students will create a research document keeping record of bibliography. The research will be about the eruption and the animal's return to the mountain. Once research is completed, students will create a fact-based fictional story in which the animal experiences a volcanic eruption. They will follow the animal through the recovery. This activity may be spread over several class periods with the possibility of some work being done as homework. The activity may also be extended to include writing a non-fiction five paragraph essay. Grades 4-6.

II. Concepts:

    A. Creative non-fiction gives information in an engaging manner.
    B. Creative non-fiction is based on fact and must be strictly researched.
    C. Difference between fact and "based" on fact
    D. Research includes research for the story as well as for the illustrations.
    E. Sources must be reputable.
    F. Proper attribution

III. Skills:

    A. Researching a subject for general mastery
    B. Researching details to expand subject
    C. Organizing researched material
    D. Writing creative non-fiction
    E. Developing a bibliography

IV. Materials Provided:
(http://www.terrycjennings.com/Teacher-Guides-and-Activities.html)

    A. Internet Resources
        1. Volcanoes

a. http://volcanoes.usgs.gov/volcanoes/st_helens/st_helens_geo_hist_101.html
   Accessed 3/5/15.
b. http://volcanoes.usgs.gov/volcanoes/st_helens/st_helens_geo_hist_99.html
   Accessed 3/5/15
2. Bears
   a. http://www.nwf.org/Wildlife/Wildlife-Library/Mammals/Black-Bear.aspx.
      Accessed 3/2/15
   b. http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/black-bear/
      Accessed 3/2/15
   c. http://www.bearlife.org/black-bear.html
   Accessed 3/2/15
3. Elk
   a. http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/elk/
      Accessed 3/2/15
   b. http://naturemappingfoundation.org/natmap/facts/elk_k6.html
      Accessed 3/2/15
   c. http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Cervus_elaphus/
      Accessed 3/2/15
4. Dark Eyed Junco
   a. http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Dark-eyed_Junco/id
      Accessed 3/2/15
   b. http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birding/dark-eyed-junco/
      Accessed 3/2/15
   c. http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/bird/dark-eyed_junco
      Accessed 3/2/15
5. Downy Woodpecker
   a. http://www.birdweb.org/Birdweb/bird/downy_woodpecker
      Accessed 3/2/15
   b. http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Picoides_pubescens/
      Accessed 3/2/15
   c. http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Downy_Woodpecker/id
      Accessed 3/2/15
6. Bobcat
   a. http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/bobcat/
      Accessed 3/2/15
   b. http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Lynx_rufus/
      Accessed 3/2/15
   c. http://a-z-animals.com/animals/bobcat/
      Accessed 3/2/15

B. Sample Internet Research Highlighted - Highlighted version of A for teacher.
C. Sample Research Document - Important facts from gathered from B for teacher
   or for handout to students in lieu of their reading A.
D. Sample Outline - Relevant facts from C grouped under headings for teacher or
   for younger students.

E. *Mother Bear's Scariest Day* - Sample Creative Non-Fiction Story using bear Research (by Terry Catasús Jennings)

V. Pre-Writing Discussion

A. In this activity students will be creating a story based on an animal's experience during the eruption of Mount St. Helens and the subsequent recovery.
B. Discuss with students the difference between non-fiction and fact-based fiction or creative non-fiction:

Non-Fiction	Fact-Based Fiction/Creative Non-Fiction
Totally based on facts	Made up story
Writer's work is based on research, including interviews	Writer's work is informed by research, often including interviews.
Goal is to inform	Goal is to provide information in a fun way.
Normally includes quoted material	Does not normally include quoted material other than dialogue.
Bibliography is included in the work	Bibliography is kept by the author/publisher to prove accuracy.

C. Read *Gopher to the Rescue! A Volcano Recovery Story.*
  1. Pick out facts in the story that would have been part of the research.
      a. About the volcanic eruption
      b. About the animals
      c. Point out how the research *informed* the writer.
  2. Pick out features from illustrations that would have resulted from research.
      a. Type of trees on mountain
      b. Animals on the mountain that are not mentioned in book
  3. Consider when the author is "in the head of" the animals
      a. How did research inform the author in those cases?
        (1) Author researched how long ago a volcano had erupted and researched the life span of all the animals. None of the animals in the book could have been alive in 1857 the last time the volcano erupted. Author can say, "Elk has never seen that before."
        (2) Can't say same about earthquake, "shaking beneath their paws" could have happened before, even caused by a car nearby.
      b. Is some of what the author portrays just plain common sense?
        (1) It is reasonable to say that since the gopher had to dig through ash and rocks that were not there before, it was surprised.
  4. Consider images in *Gopher*
      a. Spiders float in on silken threads
      b. Black smudges on the mountain
      c. Gritty, warm ash

d. Trees blown down like toothpicks
5. Consider use of repetition
   a. Should be intentional to make a point.
6. Consider how author gives a sense of passing time.
7. What details bring reader into the story?
   a. Where did author find those details?
      (1) In research
   b. What provided the thread of the story?
      (1) The gopher was the thread of this story.
   c. Do you find the thread in your research or your imagination?
      (1) For the gopher book, the thread was found in the research.
      (2) Students may find the thread of their story to be the animal they choose to follow on their research or they may have a thread or plot already in mind before.
   d. What was the hook of the story?
      (1) Possible answer "Something is different on the mountain"
         (a) Now reader wants to know what was different.
      (2) Suggest to students that as they research, they will want to look for possible hooks.
         (a) Something that will want to make the reader keep on reading.
8. What was the point of view of the story?
   a. Omniscient—all knowing
   b. Allows author to know what is happening everywhere, including in the heads of characters.
   c. If the point of view is one of the characters, the reader can only learn what that character knows at that time.
      (1) It would not be possible to talk about days, weeks, smoke, if the main character is an animal because, to our knowledge, animals don't understand these concepts.

VI. Pre-writing Preparation

A. Have students choose the main character of their stories
   1. Three choices:
      a. Animals for which research information is provided in this package (IV.A.)
         (1) Black bear, Elk, Bobcat, Dark-Eyed Junco (ground-nesting bird) and Downy Woodpecker (tree-nesting bird)
      b. Animals for which teacher gathers information
      c. Animals for which students gather information
   2. Avoid using small mammals such as squirrels and snow shoe hares because those that were on the mountain were killed.
      a. Their short legs did not allow any of them to outrun the eruption.
      b. They took part in the recovery in place. They only expanded their territory back up into the damaged area as the fringes healed.
      c. Also avoid using mountain lions and goats. There were not many of them on the mountain. Very few goats have been seen since.

B. Discuss research method.
1. Obtain information on the internet or in library book.
    a. Discuss using only reputable internet sources (.org, .edu, .gov)

    Or hand students information on chosen animal provided in this packet. (IV.A)
    a. Discuss using only reputable internet sources (.org, .edu, .gov)
2. Ask students to highlight pertinent information on the Research Document.
    a. Students will be working on the events leading up to the eruption and the recovery. Some information will not be relevant to the story to be written.
    b. Model this concept using the Internet Research on bears. (IV.A.2)
    c. Sample highlighted documents are provided for the five animals listed above for teacher use.
    d. For younger students use the Sample Research Document rather than the raw data from the internet.
C. Create a research document from the highlighted material.
1. Now that students have a better idea of the subject, they should note that not all data will be relevant to writing the story. In any research it is important to ignore unnecessary material.
    a. Data on bear characteristics, food they eat, hibernation and interesting details will be useful. These facts will inform the students' writings.
    b. Data on where do black bears live is not relevant—we already know the bear in this story lives in Mount St. Helens.
    c. It is not important to know how many bears live in North America.
3. Model this task for the students using the Sample Research Document for black bears. (IV.C.)
C. Create an outline from the research material.
1. Decide on several groupings/headings for the data.
    a. Model this for students using the bear data.
    b. Possible groupings:
        (1) Notes for illustrations
        (2) Interesting details
        (3) Diet
        (4) Hibernation
        (5) Life Span
        (6) Reproduction
        (7) New Vocabulary
    c. Groupings can be changed as the outline develops.
    d. Cut and paste information from Research Document under the appropriate heading. (add quotes)
            or
        Paraphrase material using students' own words
    e. Model this task using the Sample Outline for black bears. (IV.D.)
    f. Review students' outline and make suggestions for improvement.
D. Write a story about the bear collaboratively with the classroom (*Mother Bear's Scariest Day* is provided as a teacher's model)

1. Consider the following with your students for the first paragraph and lead the class in developing a story line that follows the facts.
   a. What happened first?
   b. How would the bear and her cub have reacted to this?
   c. Had the bear and her cub ever been involved in a volcanic eruption before?
      (1) They would have had to have been alive in 1857
   d. What details can we include in this paragraph to inform the reader and bring the reader in?
2. For subsequent paragraphs, continue in the same manner
   a. What happened next?
   b. How would the bear and her cub have reacted to this?
   c. What details can we include in this paragraph to inform the reader and bring the reader in?
3. Consider a way to convey a feeling of urgency and fear during the actual eruption.
   a. Short choppy sentences or run on sentences.
   b. Adjectives that leave reader breathless
4. Use *Gopher to the Rescue!* illustrations as additional information on the setting.
5. Lastly, consider with students whether it is likely the cub will have survived. Students could have the option of voting on what happened to the cub, or each group choose to craft that paragraph individually—cub survives vs. cub does not survive. Consider the audience. Consider the value of being absolutely honest, versus taking into account people's sensibilities.
6. Bears did not waste a lot of time visiting the mountain until there was enough food and shelter. Discuss with the students whether birds, if they choose to write about them, would do the same thing. Or elk. Birds would fly and find bugs to eat, but for a year or two would not be able to nest on the mountain. Tree nesting birds may take even longer, perhaps more than five years. Elk would visit the mountain and browse on anything that has grown, but prefer the conifers which will not populate the mountain until much later. Bobcats will visit the mountain and may eat a gopher occasionally, but they will stay in the areas that were not damaged as they expand up the mountain.
7. Follow the animal through the recovery.

VII. Writing the story
   A. Students will write a story which tells what happened to an animal during the eruption and how the animal returned to the mountain.
      1. Use strong verbs. Give good descriptions. Use interesting facts.
      2. Use images
      3. Denote the passing of time
   B. Review first draft with student and make suggestions for improvement.

VIII. Critique Group (optional)
   A. Group students with a buddy to critique the work.
   B. Have critique buddies use the sandwich method.
      1. Thank you for letting me read your work
      2. This is what I liked
      3. This is what I wish could be different
      4. This is what I enjoyed about reading your work

        a. This last one is more general
  C. Model Critique group interactions using the collaborative story about the bear.

IX. Critique students' work and make suggestions for improvement.
1. Line Edits
2. Sequencing
3. Hooks
4. Interest

X. Rewrite
A. Save last story under a new date (Naming convention: TITLEYYMMDD, e.g. Bear 150305).
    1. Never throw away a story. May need to use parts of previous stories.
B. Make grammatical and spelling changes suggested if they are correct.
C. Consider other suggestions.
    1. Give the comments a chance to settle in. Even if you don't like them, consider them seriously.
    2. May or may not want to take critique's suggestions
        a. Do they make sense?
        b. Do they make the story better?
        c. Do they agree with vision of the story or give a better vision?
    3. Most of the time if a critiquer says something doesn't work, it doesn't.

XI. Illustrations
A. Have students use notes from the research to draw the setting and any animals, people in the story.
B. If they use photographs, get permission if necessary and include attribution in bibliography.
C. Public domain pictures don't need permission

XII. Bibliography
A. Have students develop a bibliography. While a bibliography is not published in a creative non-fiction story, writers must keep their bibliography and their source material in case writer's accuracy is questioned.
B. Different school districts may require different styles. Below are sample Chicago Style entries.
    1. Book: Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
    2. Website: McDonald's Corporation. "McDonald's Happy Meal Toy Safety Facts." Accessed July 19, 2008. http://www.mcdonalds.com/corp/about/ factsheets.html.

XIII. Extend the Activity to Non-Fiction.
A. Using the research developed for the creative non-fiction story, have students write a non-five-paragraph essay on their animal's experience during the eruption and recovery.