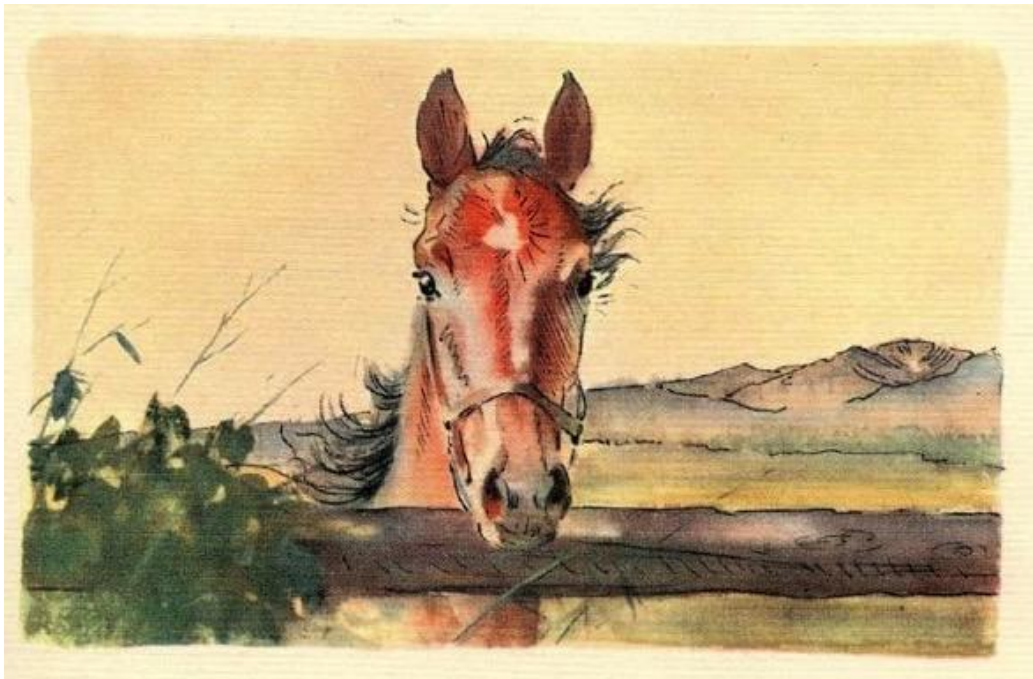


An Educational Program of the National Steinbeck Center



Growing Up in the Salinas Valley

A Middle School Writing Program Based on
John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*

LESSON 16: WRITING A LETTER

Objective

- This activity provides students with the opportunity to share their opinion and interpretation of “The Gift,” following advice provided by John Steinbeck

Relevant Common Core State Standard:

- Writing 2.0 Writing informative/explanatory texts.
- Writing 3.0 Writing Narratives.

Materials

- Handout Y1: Writing a Persuasive Letter
- Handout Y2: Thinking It Through

Procedures

Read aloud John Steinbeck's advice at the top of Handout Y1: Writing a Letter and discuss Steinbeck's suggestion. What advice does he give to other writers to help them write more easily? Next, list some of the requirements of persuasion in order to be effective: takes a firm stance one way or the other, addresses the audience's potential concerns, contains precise evidence with textual support.

Next, discuss with the class what they think Steinbeck's attitude is toward loss and suffering as a part of growing up. Have them cite evidence to back up their statements. Given that the goal of this letter is for students to persuade their audience that Jody has received a valuable gift (and by extension, that loss is an integral part of gain), students will want to review their portfolio assignments to determine the nature and extent of this gift. Brainstorm the benefits of Jody's experience in terms of gain/loss. How did the events of the story help Jody to grow up? For each of Jody's realizations, change in behavior, or new learning, require students to recall textual evidence.

Lastly, force them to commit one way or the other, to agree or disagree with Steinbeck and then be ready to back this up with supporting evidence.

As you explore the assignment's requirements, discuss with students how different their letters might be if they were writing to an adult or to someone who has already read the story. Check that students have understood the parameters of audience and purpose for this assignment. As an optional organizational tool, Handout Y2: Thinking It Through walks students through the process of identifying the author's purpose and their own personal response.

During preparation for this writing activity, also reinforce the conventions and organization of a friendly letter. Review the use of accurate transitions. Correct usage of phrases such as *after a while*, *then*, *next*, *even though*, *meanwhile*, *although*, *since*, and *before* will add consistency and organization to the essay. Base your lesson pacing and degree of attentiveness to writing skills on assessment data gained from the pre-essay rubric scores.

You may need to reproduce and share sample essays and/or focus on particular isolated skills which require reinforcement for students.

When appropriate, provide whole or small group mini-lessons on topics which may arise, such as:

- Punctuating dialogue
- Organizing paragraphs
- Varying sentence structure
- Citing textual evidence

WRITING A LETTER

Audience & Purpose

“Make your point and make it angrily...”

“It is usual that the moment you write for publication - I mean one of course - one stiffens in exactly the same way one is being photographed. The simplest way to overcome this is to write it *to* someone, like me. Write it as a letter aimed at one person. This removes the vague terror of addressing the large and faceless audience and it also, you will find, will give a sense of freedom and a lack of self-consciousness.”

From *John Steinbeck: A Study of the Short Fiction*, edited by RS Hughes.

Perhaps you have heard these two aphorisms before:

“No pain, no gain.”

“It is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.”

Taken together, these two expressions seem to be saying that you have to suffer to make progress and that even if you lose in the end, what you’ve gained makes it worth it. Does your class agree or disagree with these statements?

In “The Gift,” Jody is given a gift that has a big impact on his life: he gains a tremendous amount (love for Gabilan, increased maturity), but he loses something precious too (Gabilan, his innocent trust in adults). Decide whether you think Steinbeck feels that the suffering Jody went through as a result of his loss was worth it or not. Does Steinbeck think that Jody is a more mature and responsible person at the end of the story than he was at the beginning?

Now decide if you agree or disagree with Steinbeck. If Jody’s experience was valuable, explain why. If you think it wasn’t worth it, and all the story proved was that life’s not fair, well then, explain why you believe that. In either case, you must be able to quote evidence from the text to support your claims.

Once you’ve decided where you stand on this issue, you are now ready to “make your point and make it angrily.” Write a letter to a student in the grade below you who will be reading “The Gift” next year. Your job is to argue whether or not you believe that Jody has or has not received a valuable gift or lesson as a result of his experience with Gabilan. Since the reader of this letter has not yet read “The Gift,” you will have to provide some summary information about the story so that he/she will be able to understand what happens. Then you will need to provide quotes and evidence from the story to back you up.

Although one purpose of this letter is to persuade the reader of your opinion, another purpose is to help you reflect about the nature of loss and gain as a part of growing up. After all, sooner or later all of us will have experiences of gain and loss like Jody. Perhaps you already have. This letter will be a good way for you to process your attitude about this very important issue.

THINKING IT THROUGH: A THOUGHT PROCESSING GUIDE FOR THE LETTER WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Consider:

“No pain, no gain.” “It is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.”

Do I agree or disagree with the above, and why?

The Gift of Gabilan

Jody gains:

Jody loses:

What point is Steinbeck trying to make here?

Do I agree or disagree with him and why?

Okay, I'm ready now to make my point and make it angrily!

- **Who's my audience?** A student who hasn't read the story yet.
- **What's my purpose?** To persuade the student that the gift of Gabilan was a good/bad experience for Jody.
- **Follow the friendly letter format** (date, salutation, indentation, etc.)
- **Start with a summary:** "The Gift," by John Steinbeck, is a story about..."
- **State my opinion:** "I believe that the gift of Gabilan was a good / bad experience for Jody because..."
- **Use quotes from the book to support my opinion:** "Here's some evidence from the book
that supports what I am saying..."
- **Optional:** Refer to your own personal experience. "I can connect to how Jody felt through this
experience because I also..."
- **Conclusion:** Wrap up your letter with a concluding statement that neatly finishes what you have
been saying. (Perhaps refer back to one of the quotes at the top of the page?)