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## **LESSON PLAN: *Using Writing to Resolve Conflicts***

### **OBJECTIVES**

This lesson will help students:

- learn to use writing as a conflict resolution strategy
- use re-writing as a way to improve writing skills
- learn to respectfully critique another's writing
- consider situations from a variety of perspectives
- think about the causes of crime and the experience of prison inmates

### **GRADE LEVEL: 9-12 \***

\* Note: The film, though not graphic, presents women who recount their past, including crimes they committed. It contains mature themes and should be previewed in its entirety before being used in a classroom.

**SUBJECT AREAS:** Language Arts, Health /Working with Others (Conflict Resolution)

**MATERIALS:** VHS of "What I Want My Words to Do to You" with VCR & Monitor

**ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED:** 3-6 class periods, depending on whether work is done in class or assigned as homework and whether you view the full video or only segments.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

On its surface, "What I Want My Words to Do to You" is an 80-minute documentary about a writing workshop in a women's prison. But more than a simple look inside the walls of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, this film is about the power of words to humanize.

In 1998, playwright Eve Ensler went into Bedford Hills prison to lead a writing workshop. Through a series of exercises and discussions, the workshop participants, most of whom had been convicted of murder, grappled with the nature of their crimes and the painful truth about their choices and their own culpability. Witnessing this process allows viewers to see past the crime to the person.

In addition to giving viewers significant insight into the individuals on screen, watching women use writing to come to terms with their lives and what "might have been" provides a model that students can use to reflect on their own lives. The film offers students an extraordinary chance to learn from inmates' hindsight about what can be done to prevent future tragedies. As inmate Judith Clark puts it, what I want my words to do to you is, "Open up a dialogue. Disrupt your day... I want to leave you dissatisfied with simple explanations and rote assumptions, thirsty for complexity and the deep discomfort of ambiguity... I want to make you wonder about your own prisons. I want to make you ask why."

### **ACTIVITY**

The lesson uses the video to model using writing to think more deeply about a situation. It engages students in a writing assignment that asks them to do four revisions of their original piece, each revision focusing on a different area.

### **STEP 1: *The Video***

Introduce students to the video, briefly summarizing what they are about to see. Show the video. If you do not have time to view the video in its entirety, you may want to show only the segments including Keila Pulinaro's story (the first woman in the film – she shares the story of confronting her rapist and shooting him) and the performance/reaction segments towards the end of the film.

Allow students to share reactions to what they have seen, including speculating on alternative ways to deal with the situation that would have kept Keila out of jail. If students are not already familiar with basic principles of conflict resolution, this would be a good time to review them. (See Resources and Standards if you need further information.)

As an option, you may wish to take time to discuss, in-depth, other issues that arise from Keila's experience, including: gun control, domestic violence, relationships with the police, community responsibility, support from family, and/or racism.

### **STEP 2: *The Writing Assignment***

Point out that Keila was responding to the writing prompt: "Describe the facts of your crime." Tell students that you are going to adapt that prompt and assign them to "Describe the facts of a conflict you have been in or that you have seen." Ask them to write from a first-person perspective. Remind students that they are telling a story and not writing for Headline News. The piece needs to be long enough to tell the full story.

### **STEP 3: *1<sup>st</sup> Revision – Adding Detail***

Ask students to submit their written work to you and provide them with your feedback. Feedback should focus on the following areas:

- COMPREHENSIVE CHRONOLOGY – Are all parts of the story there, or are their pieces that the writer could fill in?
- SETTING – Ask students to be detailed in their descriptions. What were people wearing? Where did this happen? What time of day was it?
- EMOTIONS – What were they feeling? How are they conveying their emotions in their writing? What were other people feeling? How did they know what other people were feeling (e.g., tone of voice, facial expression, body language, etc.).

At this point, do not concentrate on correcting grammar except for purposes of basic clarity. Ask students to re-write their piece, incorporating the feedback.

### **STEP 4: *Critiquing Skills***

In preparation for sharing their work with one another, review how to give helpful and respectful critique. Provide model language. For example:

- "I could really feel what you were talking about when you used the words..."
- "In the section where you \_\_\_\_\_ think it might have worked better if you had..."
- "I could really relate when you \_\_\_\_\_ because..."
- "The part about \_\_\_\_\_ didn't make sense to me. What did you mean?"

Remind students that critique is not about making judgments about what they like or don't like, but rather, about what is effective and not effective.

**STEP 5: 2<sup>nd</sup> Revision – Classmate Critique**

Have each student share what they wrote with the class. As an option, you may also want to use this opportunity to coach students in public speaking skills. Let classmates offer critiques. Assign students to re-write again, accounting for the new feedback.

**STEP 6: 3<sup>rd</sup> Revision – Conflict Resolution Content**

After students have had a chance to do their second re-write, have them share again, but this time, let classmates comment specifically on the conflict and the strategy used to resolve the conflict. For each situation, encourage students to think about alternative strategies. Assign each student to re-write their scenario again, this time choosing to use the most effective conflict resolution strategy (whether or not that is the way things really happened or not).

**STEP 7: Final Revision – Grammar**

Have students hand in their third re-write to you. This time, include comprehensive comments, including comments on grammar and spelling. Ask students to revise their pieces one final time.

**STEP 8: Final Presentation**

Have students share their piece one final time. You might also arrange for a way for them to share their writing beyond the class. If you are involving students in the assessment process, this would be the time to do it.

**ASSESSMENT**

Assessment can be based either on writing quality or on conflict resolution skills, depending on your goals.

If this is primarily a writing exercise, then grade each student's final revision using the same criteria you use to grade other written work.

If this is primarily a conflict resolution exercise, then have the class assess each person's assignment according to how well their ultimate solution:

- avoids violence
- seems plausible
- works as a model for others
- decreases the potential for future conflict.

**EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS**

- In the film, inmate Judith Clark hopes that her writing will prompt audiences to ask why 2 million people are currently incarcerated in the U.S. Use the film as a springboard to investigate the history of the justice system in the U.S., the development of a privatized prison industry, crime rates and the efficacy of prison sentences as deterrence, and/or alternatives to incarceration. At the end of their research, students should be able to answer Clark's question.
- Assign students to read a book from the prison literature or prison diary genre and compare the book to what they see in the film.

- Take students to visit a local jail. Many jails run special tours in the hope that a glimpse of what being incarcerated is really like and an opportunity to talk with selected inmates will make young people think twice before committing a crime.

## RESOURCES

For additional resources, including a general discussion guide and links to information about women, prison, and writing, see the website for the film: [www.pbs.org/pov/whatiwant](http://www.pbs.org/pov/whatiwant).

There are many models for conflict resolution. If your school already offers training in peer mediation, you should follow whichever model they use. If not, a convenient "one-stop shop" with links to many kinds of programs and resources is available at the Conflict Resolution: <http://www.crinfo.org/>

## STANDARDS

Main standards covered include:

### Language Arts - Writing

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

### Language Arts - Listening and Speaking

Standard 8: Using listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

### Working With Others / Health

Standard 2: Uses conflict resolution techniques

1. Communicates ideas in a manner that does not irritate others
2. Resolves conflicts of interest
3. Identifies goals and values important to opponents
4. Understands the impact of criticism on psychological state, emotional state, habitual behavior, and beliefs
5. Understands that three ineffective responses to criticism are (1) being aggressive, (2) being passive, and (3) being both
6. Understands that three effective responses to criticism are (1) acknowledgment, (2) token agreement with a critic, and (3) probing clarifications
7. Determines the causes of conflicts
8. Does not blame
9. Identifies an explicit strategy to deal with conflict
10. Determines the seriousness of conflicts
11. Identifies mutually agreeable times for important conversations with opponents
12. Identifies individual vs. group or organizational interests in conflicts
13. Establishes guidelines and rules for negotiating
14. Determines the mini-max position of those in a conflict