

CULTURAL AWARENESS: A WRITING ACTIVITY

GRADES 9-12 (can be adapted for Middle School use)

SUBJECTS English, Language Arts, American Studies, Sociology/Anthropology

OVERVIEW The documentary **My Journey Home** tells three stories of Americans who do not feel quite at home either in America or in the countries from which their parents emigrated. Each segment recounts a journey home in search of self-discovery. The lesson begins with an exercise that asks students to look at a variety of quotations from literature that explore the meaning of *home*. Discussion questions then follow for each of the segments: [Faith Adiele](#) journeys to her father's homeland of Nigeria and in search of her mother's roots in Scandinavia, [Andrew Lam](#) returns to Vietnam from whence his family fled when he was a young boy, and [Armando Peña](#) returns to his roots in South Texas and Mexico. After viewing the film three writing assignments follow: the writing of a poem about a journey captured in "fleeting images," a letter to one of the film's subjects, and a personal essay in which students reflect on where they feel and do not feel *at home* and why.

OBJECTIVES

- To help students identify with Americans who are unlike themselves in some respects through the discovery of things they share in common.
- To help students understand the complex ways that culture shapes the ways we are perceived by other people.
- To expand students' expressive capacity in creative writing.
- To teach letter and essay writing.

TIME NEEDED Time variable depending upon implementation of the lesson.
Minimum 1 hour, Maximum 7 hours

Each segment is roughly 35 to 40 minutes long. Allow fifty minutes to an hour to view and discuss each of the three segments. The accompanying writing assignments can be implemented as homework, or may be written and revised during in-class "writers workshop" periods. Teachers can choose which of the three writing assignments to implement, offer students a choice, or assign all three – either one writing exercise following each of the video segments, or all three after all three segments are shown.

MATERIALS

- The documentary video **My Journey Home**
- Writing materials.

TEACHING PROCEDURE

Discussion Topic One: Definitions of *Home*

Explain to students that they are going to watch a film entitled **My Journey Home** in which three American citizens take journeys to learn more about themselves, their roots, and the places outside America they consider in some sense *home*.

In preparation for the writing assignments, ask students to quickly write down three ways they define *home*. Next, ask each member of the class to share at least one of these definitions with the class.

To stimulate an exchange of ideas about the meaning of *home*, both its literal and figurative meaning, distribute the following definitions:

PROVERBIAL SAYINGS AND EXPRESSIONS ABOUT *HOME*

Home Sweet Home.
Keep the home fires burning.
Home is where the heart is.
Home is where I hang my hat.
Make yourself at home.
I'm homesick.
A home base.
Home turf.
Home front.

QUESTIONS FROM LITERATURE ABOUT *HOME*

“Such is the patriot’s boast, where’er we roam,
His first, best country ever, is home”
Oliver Goldsmith

“You Can’t Go Home Again”
Title of a novel by Thomas Wolfe

“Home is where one starts from”
T.S. Eliot from *Murder in the Cathedral*.

“You can’t appreciate home till you’ve left it...”
O. Henry

“That is my home of love: if I have ranged,
Like him that travels, I return again.”
Shakespeare, Sonnet 107

QUESTIONS FROM LITERATURE ABOUT *HOME* (continued)

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.”
Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”

“ Where we love is home,
Home that our feet may leave, but not our hearts.”
Oliver Wendell Holmes

“To seek their fortunes further than at home
Where small experience grows”
Shakespeare from *The Taming of the Shrew*

Questions to pose in a discussion:

- The word *home* is a noun: a person, place, thing or idea. In what ways is *home* a physical, tangible place? In what ways is it an idea? Which is more important to the meaning of *home* in your opinion?
- Is *home* always related to family? Is home always related to love?
- In what ways are the meanings of *home* and *homeland* intertwined? Can a person be *at home* in a country they were not born in?
- Can we have more than one *home*?
- Looking over all the quotations, how many of them relate to traveling away from *home* or returning *home*? Would we understand the meaning of *home* if we never traveled away?
- Can *home* be defined as the place from which you come?
- Is *home* always the place we most want to be?
- Why do some people want to return *home* to die or to be buried?

Discussion Topic Two: Discussing the Film

The film is divided into three segments, each of which features a journey home. Throughout your discussions of the film invite students to share personal stories of what home, family, and a place in America mean to them. Pose questions like, “Can anyone identify with some aspect of the experiences of Adiele, Lam, or Peña?” “Does anyone have a family story similar to one of theirs, and in what way?” This will help students identify with the subjects of the film as well as prepare them to write about their own experiences.

**TEACHING
PROCEDURE**
(cont)

Faith Adiele’s Segment (from the beginning of the film to approximately 34 minutes)

Before they watch the film ask students to focus on how Adiele defines her own identity.

What is the meaning of home for Adiele? What has been the main source of her problems “fitting in” in America?

Post-viewing questions:

- During the segment Adiele says that “Home is a state of making connections with people.” In what ways is Adiele well-equipped to make connections with a variety of people in many places? Do you think she has been successful in making a *home* for herself through her connections to people? Where is her *home* in your opinion?
- Adiele says that she is African *and* American but *not* African-American. What does she mean by this statement? Is being African-American only a matter of color? In what ways is being African-American a matter of culture?
- Why does Adiele’s father return to Nigeria? In what way does *homeland* define for him the place he must call *home*?
- Approximately 28 minutes into the film, Adiele says, “How can I begin to belong to a place I was not born?” What about Ibo culture makes it hard for her to belong? Why do her siblings each have a tree of their own? How does this symbolize their “roots” in a particular place? Adiele considers herself to be her father’s first daughter, yet according to Ibo culture, is she not “first daughter”? Can she make a place for herself in her Nigerian family nonetheless?
- How are cultural traditions in conflict over how Adiele sees herself versus how others define her? Is this true in America, Africa and Scandinavia?
- Has Adiele resolved her struggles to define herself and find a place for herself in America, Nigeria, and Scandinavia? If so, how has she accomplished this? What sacrifices do you think she has had to make in order to do so?

Andrew Lam’s Segment (approximately 34 minutes into the film to approximately 1 hour 7 minutes)

Before they watch the film ask students to focus on the ways in which Lam, like Adiele, has to reinvent himself in order to survive emotionally. How does the expression “You can’t go home again” capture part of Lam’s experience? What has he gained and lost by growing up in America instead of Vietnam?

TEACHING PROCEDURE (cont)

Post-viewing questions:

- Like Adiele, Andrew Lam's face sets him apart. Lam is told by other Vietnamese that he does not have a Vietnamese face because he did know suffering. Do you think that it is true that our faces can reflect our experiences and tell others who we are?
- Lam says that growing up he also had no place in America – "No place in the American imagination." What does Lam mean by this? For whom is there room in the American imagination, in your opinion? What is the process by which such a place is created?
- How has Vietnam changed since Lam grew up? How has he changed since returning there? What place is there for him in Vietnam today, in your opinion?
- Lam and his family fled Vietnam on little notice, taking little with them. Lam says that when refugees flee each individual keeps alive a fantasy of what they would have brought with them from home, had they been able to. What does he regret not having taken? What would be most important to you?
- Unlike Adiele, Lam's conflict over who he is is tied to his choice of which language to use, Vietnamese or English. Why does he fall mute in America? How does he find his "voice" as a writer?
- Lam's new identity is also bound up with a new choice of a name. How do names and nicknames reflect who we are and who we want to be?
- Like Adiele, Lam complains that he has no role model in America for who he is or who he can become (in his case a Vietnamese writer, writing in English). How do both Adiele and Lam suffer from a lack of role models in America? How does each re-emerge from their struggles as a stronger individual?
- Like Adiele, Lam visits his mother's and father's ancestral birthplaces. How does this experience extend Lam's understanding of who he is, and how he came to be that way?
- Lam says that to be alone without your family, you cannot function in a Confucian sense because you can no longer define yourself in relationship to other family members. Do you think Lam would now be happy in the world he left behind? Why or why not?

Armando Peña's Segment (approximately 108 minutes into the film until the end at 152)

Before they watch the film ask students to think about whether or not Armando Peña and his brothers grew up in a home, even though that home had no place. How does their journey enrich their understanding of who they are and where they came from? What about their experiences are like and unlike those of Adiele and Lam?

TEACHING PROCEDURE (cont)

Post-viewing questions:

- Like Adiele and Lam, Peña's family history crosses international borders. How does having roots in two countries make it difficult for them to know their complete family history?
- The Catholic faith does not permit cremation, yet Rosa Peña asks to be cremated. Why did she make this choice? How do her ashes symbolize this family's love and their dilemma?
- Armando says, "As migrants we were a complete family unit then." Did they have a home that moved with them, or were they homeless, in your opinion?
- The Peña brothers were raised without their father. How is their journey a journey to find out about who he was and why he left them? What answers do they find? If their father had still been living, like Adiele's, in what ways might their journey have had a different ending?
- The Peña brothers were also cut off from their mother's family by problems they know little about. Does their journey help them solve the mystery of why Rosa's family rejected her, or did it simply add to the mystery?
- Armando says that his mother taught them "How to survive and how to be men. We had to figure out how to be fathers on our own." How did Armando reinvent himself, as did Adiele and Lam? How is he like his older brothers, but different? Did his mother support his efforts to win dignity as a migrant worker and get an education?
- What do you think this journey accomplished for the Penas? Was it important for them to make it?

Compare and Contrast Questions for all three segments:

- In what ways do Adiele, Lam and Peña feel marginalized by American culture? What role does race play? What role does culture play?
- Are any of them more at home in the culture in which their family members originated (Mexico, Scandinavia, Nigeria, Vietnam)?
- In what ways has the journey to meet family members helped them to discover who they are?
- Where is home for Adiele, Lam and Peña? Why?
- How did historical events shape each life?
- Which parents were most supportive of their children's need to reinvent their identity in America? How did they support that effort or frustrate it?
- As adults, how have Adiele, Lam and (some of the) Pena brothers found work that utilizes their ability to cross cultural boundaries?
- In preparation for writing, ask students to compare the "voice" of all three narrators. How does the personality of the narrator convey his or her story in words? Which narrator is most lyrical and poetic? Which seems most objective? Does any use an angry, sardonic or sarcastic tone?

TEACHING PROCEDURE (cont)

Writing Assignment One: Fleeting Images

Choose one of the segments that moved students and ask them to write a poem of “fleeting images” that occur on the journey it depicts. Tell students that the goal is to capture the experience of travel and movement, in a car for example, where images pass by too quickly to grasp in their entirety.

Pre-writing Activity:

Re-show the segment, or parts of it, with the sound turned off. As students view the film again ask them to jot down descriptions of the images that move by, and that move them.

Their notes should then be reshaped into a poem. Students can write the poem in the voice of subject of the video (“I see my aunt holding on to me as...” or as themselves addressing the subject (“I see your aunt holding on to you...”).

Requisites:

Tell students that they should use short phrases, condensed language, and evocative words. The way a traveler writes a postcard in which they wish to say a lot in few words, so this journey is being caught in short poetic phrases. The poem need not tell a complete story or “explain” what is happening. It should concentrate on imagery and emotions.

After completing a “fleeting images” poem about the film, ask students to write one about themselves. It should try to capture either a real or figurative journey they have taken in their own lives. Suggest that students find a photograph to display with their poem.

RUBRIC FOR EVALUATING THE POEM		
CRITERIA	1-5	COMMENTS
Did student write about images from the video that reflected an understanding of the subject’s life?		
Did the student use vivid, evocative and condensed language?		
Did the student use correct spelling?		
Does the poem reflect effort and craftsmanship?		
Is the poem moving and meaningful?		
Overall Comment: Strengths, Weaknesses, Suggestions:		

TEACHING PROCEDURE (cont)

Writing Assignment Two: An Imaginary Letter

Adiele, Lam and Peña have shared very personal and even painful stories with us. Tell students that they are going to write an imaginary letter to one of them. Each student should choose the one film subject that he or she feels would be most sympathetic to his or her own life experiences. The letter should be mainly about the student, but may also make references to the experiences of the film subject, (e.g. “I know you will understand this because you too....”).

Pre-Writing Activity:

Suggest to students that they write about some of the following topics, focussing on just two or three. Each topic should be developed with enough supporting detail to convey to any reader something about the author’s life and experiences. After they have chosen their topics, ask students to make a list or outline of what they plan to write about.

Suggested Topics

- Divided families
- Divided selves
- The search for family history and thus personal identity
- Feeling different in America
- A journey home as a means of self-discovery
- The loss of a loved one
- Home, where it is and what it means
- Is there anyone else like me? The search for role models
- Mothers, fathers and siblings and what they mean to a family
- How you define yourself versus how others see you
- The painful process of reinventing the self
- Finding meaning in life through work
- The impact of race and cultural differences
- The impact of historical events as they shape personal lives

Requisites:

The letter should include a minimum of five paragraphs:

- An introductory paragraph in which the writer describes who he or she is and the purpose of the letter.
- Three paragraphs each of which addresses a different topic (chosen from the list above) **or** three paragraphs all on the same topic, with each paragraph developing an aspect of one over-arching story.
- A concluding paragraph which explains why the sharing of personal stories can be beneficial to the one telling the story and the one receiving the story.

TEACHING PROCEDURE (cont)

RUBRIC FOR EVALUATING THE LETTER		
CRITERIA	1-5	COMMENTS
Did the student demonstrate an understanding of the conflicts and difficulties described by the film subject?		
Did the student include five paragraphs with each one clearly focused on one topic?		
Did the student use complete and grammatically well-constructed sentences? Was the spelling accurate?		
Did the student describe in meaningful depth and detail the issues he or she chose to write about?		
Was the letter interesting and moving to read?		
Overall Comment: Strengths, Weaknesses, Suggestions:		

Writing Assignment Three: *At Home*, An Essay

Ask students to write an essay in which they describe what it means to feel *at home* in a particular location. They should then compare that place to a place where they do not feel *at home*. The places could be two countries, their own home and a friend's or relative's home, their home and their school, their home and a place in a different neighborhood, or a place associated with work. What are words that describe the opposite of being *at home*, such as feeling alienated, unwelcome, strange.

To sharpen the sociological and political insights of essay topic for advanced students, narrow the topic to *feeling at home, and not feeling at home in America*.

Pre-Writing Activities

Ask students to review the quotations about *home* in this lesson and then to write their own working definition. Tell students that their definition will provide the starting-off point for their essay. After they have chosen the places they wish to write about ask students to write lists of reasons why these places either do or do not feel like *home*.

TEACHING PROCEDURE (cont)

What do the two places share in common, and what is it that makes them different? What roles might physical setting, social class, race, language, age, politics, familiarity with social norms all play in making a person feel *at home* or *not at home*?

Requisites

The essay should consist of (at least) five paragraphs.

- The first paragraph should introduce a definition of *home* and what it means to feel *at home*.
- The second paragraph should describe one place students define as *home*. Students should demonstrate why this place fits their definition of *home*.
- The third paragraph should describe a place where the student does not feel *at home*.
- The fourth paragraph should compare and contrast these two places.
- The fifth paragraph should summarize and illuminate something about it means to feel *at home* and what the student has learned about him or herself and society from this assignment.

RUBRIC FOR THE *AT HOME* ESSAY

CRITERIA	1-5	COMMENTS
Did the student arrive at a clearly stated and useful definition of <i>home</i> ? Did the student apply the definition to the places he/she chose to write about?		
Did each paragraph develop one point in meaningful depth and detail?		
Did the student use complete and grammatically constructed sentences? Was the spelling accurate?		
Was the writing style lively, varied and engaging?		
Did the student arrive at interesting and enlightening conclusions at the end?		
Overall Comment: Strengths, Weaknesses, Suggestions:		

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can assess each other's work using the rubrics in writer's workshops. Requiring multiple drafts will produce the best results.

- The teacher can be presented with the final draft and make the final assessment of students' work using the rubrics.

EXTENSIONS

- Display all work on bulletin boards or stage an "open mike" evening for students to read their work to a selected audience.
- Post student work on a website and encourage the use of accompanying graphics.
- Explore the themes in the documentary through the assignment of relevant works of literature.

RELEVANT NATIONAL STANDARDS

Language Arts, from Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel, at <http://www.mcrel.org/>) standards for grades 9-12:

Standard 1 Student uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process:

- Uses a variety of pre-writing strategies
- Drafts and revises
- Evaluates own and other's writing
- Edits for grammar, punctuation, capitalization and spelling
- Uses strategies that address different audiences
- Writes ...autobiographical and observational narrative and provides supportive descriptive detail
- Writes reflective compositions that use personal experience as a basis for reflection.

Standard 2: Uses the rhetorical and stylistic aspects of writing

- Uses precise and descriptive language that clarifies and enhances ideas
- Arranges paragraphs in logical order
- Uses a variety of sentence structures
- Uses a variety of techniques to provide supporting detail
- Uses a variety of techniques to convey a personal style and voice

Standard 3

- Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions (e.g. spelling, capitalization, correct grammar, etc.)

Behavioral Studies, from Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel, at <http://www.mcrel.org/>) standards for grades 9-12:

- Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior.
- Understands that social distinctions are a part of every culture, but they take many different forms.

RELEVANT NATIONAL STANDARDS (cont)

- Understands that heredity, culture, and personal experience interact in shaping human behavior.
- Understands that family, gender, ethnicity, nationality, institutional affiliations, socioeconomic status, and other group and cultural influences contribute to the shaping of a person's identity

Standard 2 9-12

- Understands various meanings of social group, general implications of group membership, and different ways that groups function.
- Understands that groups have patterns for preserving and transmitting culture even as they adapt to environmental and/or social change.
- Understands that social groups may have patterns of behavior, values, beliefs, and attitudes that can help or hinder cross-cultural understanding.

Standard 4 9-12

- Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions.
- Understands how changes in social and political institutions (e.g., church, school, political party) both reflect and affect individuals' career choices, values, and significant actions.
- Understands that the decisions of one generation both provide and limit the range of possibilities open to the next generation.

American History, from the National Center for History in the Schools
(<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/>) National Standards for History, grades 5-12:

Era 9. Standard 4A 9-12

- The student understands the “Second Reconstruction” and its advancement of civil rights.

Era 10 Standard 2B

- The student understands the new immigration and demographic shifts. The student can identify major issues that affected immigrants and explain the conflicts these issues engendered.

Civics and Government, from the Center for Civic Education
(<http://www.civiced.org>) National Standards for Civics and Government:

Standard II B. 4 9-12

Diversity in American society – Students identifies the many forms of diversity found in American society

RELEVANT NATIONAL STANDARDS

(cont)

Standard V D 2. Dispositions that foster respect for individual worth and human dignity.
Standard V D3. Dispositions that incline the citizen to public affairs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joan Brodsky Schur is an educational consultant, writer, and teacher. She is author of *Immigrants in America: The Arab Americans* and co-author of *In a New Land: An Anthology of Immigrant Literature*. She has worked for both the National Archives and PBS developing lessons for their websites. She currently serves on the TeacherSource Advisory Group for PBS Online and as Social Studies Curriculum Consultant to the Village Community School in New York City where she taught English and social studies for twenty years.