



## Creative Writing Through Rewriting

**Target grade level:** 6-12 if done semi-independently, 4-12 with parent/caregiver support

**Length:** 30-45 minutes (plus 5-15 minutes prep time)

**What students will do:** Talk and think about how the different elements of a story relate to each other; creatively rewrite the opening scene of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in a new setting.

**What you'll need:** Lined paper, pencils (with erasers!). A whiteboard isn't necessary, but if you happen to have one, you can put it to good use here.

**What we're providing:** An excerpt from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, glossary of terms, in-depth lesson plan

### Outline of the activity:

- 1. Introduce the concept of rewriting and talk about why a writer might do it.** Lots of writers, including Twain, rewrote other people's stories to learn about how good writing works and to put their own spin on stories they loved—and stories they thought they could improve!
- 2. Talk about what plot, point-of-view, character, and setting mean.**  
Give the most attention to setting. Talk about the full meanings of time and place, as that's what they'll be changing in their own rewrites.
- 3. Read the opening scene of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* together.**  
This can be read aloud, read silently, or read collaboratively as dialogue. Have students mark unfamiliar words, then provide definitions or dictionary. Discuss the scene, especially the setting, to make sure everyone understands it.
- 4. Have students pick a new setting and rewrite the scene in that new setting.**  
For younger students or those who might struggle to get started, brainstorm a few setting changes and talk about how they might change the story, then pick one setting and have students mark up the excerpt with everything they would need to change in this new setting. Parents and caregivers can do this too—raise the stakes by letting the students assign you the new setting *you* must use!
- 5. Talk about what they wrote.**  
Feel free to begin discussion before they've finished writing, as it's the thinking about writing that matters most here. Have them share what setting they picked and how it changed the story, even reading a bit of it out loud if they want to.
- 6. Optional extension/alternate version.**  
Have them think about how their favorite book/movie would be different set in 1840s Missouri. Or have them rewrite the scene from the perspective of another character in the scene—either Tom or the cat under the bed!

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## Creative Writing Through Rewriting: Full Lesson Plan

*Note: this full lesson plan is here to provide you with a refresher on any concepts you may have forgotten from when you were in school, and to give you a plan to use if you want to teach this as a full lesson. You can also focus on the rewriting activity itself without doing the full lesson if you'd prefer, especially with older students.*

### **Introduce the concept of rewriting.**

You can use any/all of the following frameworks and explanation, depending on the age and number of students you're working with.

- Creative writing is fun, but it can also feel difficult, especially when you've got a pencil and a blank piece of paper, or an empty document and a blinking cursor! You want to tell a great story, but where do you start? Mark Twain often started with someone else's story that he'd heard or read and challenged himself to make something new with it. This helped him become a better storyteller.
- Rewriting can be for more than just practice, too. John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* are all examples of published books that use this approach.
- It's the same thing done by contemporary fanfiction writers. Creative rewriting can be about filling in the moments missing from a piece of media you love, or continuing a story, or rewriting it from the perspective of another character.
- Great writers aren't born great writers. They mess up a lot. They become great writers by practicing, and by writing silly things that are fun, even if they're not perfect.

### **Have students define the elements of a story and talk about how those elements interact to make a great story**

Write the following story elements out on a piece of paper or a whiteboard, leaving a good amount of space in between each one. plot, point-of-view, characters, setting. As you talk through each element, write down what you brainstorm.

Ask students what we mean when we talk about each element. Their answers will be different depending on age and the terms they've learned. It can be really helpful to draw on other forms of media that they like, so don't shy away from making comparisons to TV, movies, graphic novels, and video games.

*Plot:* the story, a series of events, action, challenges and solutions, choices, climax, rising and falling action (denouement)

- Does a book just have one big plot? Talk about sub-plots, small scenes.

*Point-of-View*: perspective, the character(s) through whose eyes we see the story

- This is not always a main/central character, at least in the world of the story itself. Can they think of a book where the reader gets the story from the perspective of someone like this? (*The Great Gatsby*, *A Christmas Carol*)
- What are the differences between first, second, and third perspective? What in the story tells us which perspective is being used? (I/you/they)
- Omniscient (the narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of all of the characters) vs. limited omniscient (the narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of some characters—maybe only one character—better than those of others)

*Characters*: the people in a story, primary and secondary, protagonists and antagonists

- What do we want to know about characters? Their personal lives and histories, their personalities, the relationships they have with other characters.

*Setting*: where and when a story takes place, and the interaction between those elements

- *Time*: time of day, date, month, year, season, and point in history—past, present, or future; point in the life cycle of the characters (ie childhood).
- *Place*: town/state/region/country, geography and natural environment, built environment (roads and buildings, rooms and furnishings)

### **Read through the excerpt of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* together**

Make sure everyone has a copy of the excerpt and a pencil. Depending on age, reading ability, and the general vibe of the room at this point, you can read this individually, read it out loud to them while they read along, or read it out loud with students reading the lines of Tom and Aunt Polly as they come up. The excerpt attached is formatted to make this last option easier.

As they read, have students circle any words they don't know. When you're done reading, start with defining those words. We've included some of the trickier words and phrases in a glossary, but this can also be a good time to bust out the dictionary and look things up.

Review what happened in the story to make sure everyone understands the plot, perspective, and characters (don't forget the cat!). Then talk about the setting.

- When and where does this story take place? What in the writing helped you figure this out?
- *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* takes place in Missouri in the 1840s. Mark Twain was writing about his own childhood, but a fictionalized version.

## **Write your own version of the opening of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by changing the setting!**

Some students will be ready to write immediately. If students aren't sure where to start, have them brainstorm a few different setting changes—some normal, some silly—and think a little about how those changes would impact the story as written. Then have them pick one to write out.

- Whether students are ready to write immediately or need a little more support to get going, it can really help to have them mark up the existing story with the changes they want to make before they start writing. This is especially helpful if the setting change is a relatively “normal” one, because it can help students think about when in the story the setting change starts to *matter* (i.e. when would it matter that it was in winter instead of late summer?)

***Parents/teachers/caregivers should also write their own versions!*** You're asking students to be creative and share that creativity with others. That can make them feel vulnerable. You can help with that by joining them in that vulnerability. You can even let them pick the setting change *you* have to work with!

### **Share what you wrote and thought about**

What new setting did each person pick and what did they have to change in the story? The new setting will often have more implications than the writer—child or adult—realized, so this should be an open, constructive conversation about how creative writing works.

### **Extension/alternate version**

Have students share some of their favorite stories (any form) and think about how they would be different in a different setting—maybe even if they took place in the setting of *Tom Sawyer*!

***Alternate version:*** Instead of changing setting, change *perspective*. Have them write this story from Tom's perspective, or better yet, from the perspective of the cat under the bed! That always produces great results.

### **Glossary**

Stove-lids: the flat, iron lid of a wood-stove

Jimpson: a poisonous plant that looks a bit like a morning glory

Roundabout: old-fashioned jacket

Truck: stuff

Switch: a thin branch used for whipping

On the instant: at once

## From *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

“TOM!”

No answer.

“TOM!”

No answer.

“What’s gone with that boy, I wonder? You TOM!”

No answer.

The old lady pulled her spectacles down and looked over them about the room; then she put them up and looked out under them. She seldom or never looked through them for so small a thing as a boy; they were her state pair, the pride of her heart, and were built for “style,” not service—she could have seen through a pair of stove-lids just as well. She looked perplexed for a moment, and then said, not fiercely, but still loud enough for the furniture to hear:

“Well, I lay if I get hold of you I’ll—”

She did not finish, for by this time she was bending down and punching under the bed with the broom, and so she needed breath to punctuate the punches with. She resurrected nothing but the cat.

“I never did see the beat of that boy!”

She went to the open door and stood in it and looked out among the tomato vines and “jimson” weeds that constituted the garden. No Tom. So she lifted up her voice at an angle calculated for distance and shouted:

“Y-o-u-u TOM!”

There was a slight noise behind her and she turned just in time to seize a small boy by the slack of his roundabout and arrest his flight.

“There! I might ’a’ thought of that closet. What you been doing in there?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing! Look at your hands. And look at your mouth. What is that truck?”

“I don’t know, aunt.”

“Well, I know. It’s jam—that’s what it is. Forty times I’ve said if you didn’t let that jam alone I’d skin you. Hand me that switch.”

The switch hovered in the air—the peril was desperate—

“My! Look behind you, aunt!”

The old lady whirled round, and snatched her skirts out of danger. The lad fled on the instant, scrambled up the high board-fence, and disappeared over it.

Copy for website:

*When students come to visit us at the Mark Twain House & Museum, one thing they learn about is Twain's career as a writer. This means thinking about how much fun he had with writing, but also how much he challenged himself to get better and more creative throughout his life. One way he did this was by creatively rewriting stories he read and heard, which meant figuring out what made the original stories work before putting his own spin on them!*

*At the museum, we do a creative writing program based on this approach. In it, students think about the basic elements of fiction writing—plot, point-of-view, characters, and setting—and how writers use them to tell good stories. Then they try their hand at it by creatively rewriting the opening scene of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. We've adapted this into an activity you can do at home.*

*We usually do this program with grades 6-12, but you could absolutely make it work with younger students, especially if you're working with them one-on-one or in very small groups. The writing portion is designed to be done individually but could easily be done collaboratively.*