Gather Sensory Details About a Historical Setting

1. Focus

Explain Gathering Sensory Details About a Historical Setting

Say: When I write, I need to know about the time and place I’m writing about. I need to see what my characters see, hear the sounds they hear, smell the odors and fragrances they smell, touch things they touch, and taste the foods they eat. In a realistic story, I don’t have to work that hard to do this. I know a lot about the world around me. But what if I am writing about characters that lived 400 years ago? How do I get into their world? I have to do a lot of research to create sensory images. Today we’re going to practice doing that together.

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, students will:
• Learn ways to connect with a historical time period.
• Record sensory information about the time period.
• Discuss the strategy and how they can apply it to their independent writing.

Preparation

Materials Needed
• Chart paper and markers
• Books, maps, fine art, and/or movies (see Advanced Preparation)
• Sensory Details Chart (BLM 5)
• Interactive whiteboard resources

Advanced Preparation

The think-alouds in this mini-lesson focus on the early colonial period in New England. If you wish to use the think-alouds as written, gather resources about that time period. You may also use these Web resources:
• http://www.pbs.org/wnet/colonialhouse/history/scenery.html (outside)
• http://www.pbs.org/wnet/colonialhouse/history/governor.html (interior)

Model Gathering Sensory Details About a Historical Setting

Display a Sensory Details chart like the one below on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources. Also display an image of a colonial New England farm. As you talk about the sensory details, model recording them on the chart.

Sample think-aloud. Say: I want my story to take place in colonial New England. It’s the early 1600s, and my characters have just arrived. I needed to form a mental picture of how my characters live, so I took some books out of the library. I also found a map of the thirteen original colonies, and I went on the Internet to find images of life in colonial New England. In the early 1600s, the colonies were not well formed. Colonists were mostly living in small cabins; they didn’t have big farms yet. Since there were no photographs in colonial times, I looked for paintings and other images. As I looked at them, I started to form ideas about my characters. I decided they will live near the wilderness and a body of water. They have cleared the land around their little cabin. They have a few animals—a horse, maybe a cow to give them milk, and maybe a few chickens, too. They live in small communities, but these communities are isolated. The people can hear wolves howling at night. They can also hear birds, crickets, and frogs. They don’t have much to eat. They have cool water from a lake. They might find some berries, and they probably eat fish and wild birds. The mosquitoes probably buzz around my characters’ ears at night and bite them. I’m going to write all of these details onto my sensory description chart.
Historical Fiction

Strategies to Support ELs

### Beginning

Pair beginning ELs with fluent English speakers during the practice activity. Keep in mind that they will not be able to contribute many ideas orally. You will want to work with them individually to reinforce concepts while other students write independently.

- I see ____.
- I hear ____.
- I smell ____.
- I feel ____.
- I taste ____.

### Intermediate

Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the practice activity. Write the following simple sentence frames on chart paper and model how students can use them to contribute ideas in the group:

- I see ____.
- I hear ____.
- I smell ____.
- I feel ____.
- I taste ____.

### Advanced

Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the practice activity.

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**2. Rehearse**

**Practice Gathering Sensory Details About a Historical Setting**

Distribute copies of BLM 5. Display images of the interior of an early colonial house. Ask students to imagine characters might see, hear, smell, touch, and taste inside such a home. If your class includes English learners or other students who need support, use “Strategies to Support ELs.”

**Share Ideas**

Bring students together and invite volunteers to share the ideas they generated in their small groups. Add details to the right column of your sensory details chart. Ask students to discuss how they can apply this same strategy to their independent research.

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**3. Independent Writing and Conferring**

***Say:*** Sensory detail makes our settings and characters come alive. Today we learned that in order to write convincingly about a historical context, we need to do a lot of research. We need to absorb the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of a place in time. We need to feel what our characters felt. If we are writing about colonists, we need to put ourselves into a colony. If we are writing about pioneers living in a log cabin, we need to go inside a log cabin. Since we can’t go back in time, we do research to find out as much as we can.

Make BLM 5 available to students who are ready to research their historical fiction settings during independent writing time.

**4. Share**

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to share sensory details they learned from their research.

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### Sample Sensory Details Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense</th>
<th>Outside Details</th>
<th>Inside Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sight</td>
<td>• wilderness</td>
<td>• lake or other body of water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• lake or other body of water</td>
<td>• isolated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• farm animal sounds</td>
<td>• wild animals in the forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• wild animals in the forest</td>
<td>• birds, crickets, frogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• birds, crickets, frogs</td>
<td>• mosquitoes buzzing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smell</td>
<td>• animal smells</td>
<td>• plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>• mosquitoes biting you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>• cool water</td>
<td>• berries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• berries</td>
<td>• birds, like wild turkey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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