

A Writing Picnic

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With or without a picnic basket, a class picnic is an opportunity to combine food, fun—and writing practice.

In the opening keynote address at the TESOL 2022 International Convention & English Language Expo, Hector Ramirez said, “Laughter is the genetic disposition for learning.” This got me thinking of all the fun and laughter my students and I share in my classes. I would like to share one of my favorite fun learning activities for writing, which teachers can use in most English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts.

Your ESL/EFL writing class has worked hard all semester. They have studied the elements

to use in essays or stand-alone paragraphs.

They have written introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions, thesis statements, and topic sentences, and they have learned about organization, transitions, vocabulary, and grammar. Furthermore, they have become familiar with types of writing such as narrative, chronological order, descriptive, and comparison/contrast. But most importantly, the students have drawn together as a class, and now it is time to celebrate all their hard work.

In other words, it is time to party. However, this will be a party that incorporates the curriculum in a fun way. It will be a “writing picnic.”

As you have heard, there is no such thing as a free lunch. Here is the work you will have to do for the lunch we are having on [date]. You will need to write about the picnic by following the format below. This assignment should look professional and demonstrate your writing ability. In other words, you should brainstorm, outline, write a draft, edit, make corrections, have someone else read your draft and offer suggestions, make more corrections, and then submit a final copy.

Here are the paragraphs you must include:

Paragraph #1

Write a travel history about how you went to the party. Start your paragraph with a topic sentence. Describe where you started, the kind of transportation you used, what you saw and heard along the way, what buildings you passed, people you saw, what dangers (if any) you faced, and other details that add interest and bring your paragraph to life.

Paragraph #2

Describe the location where the picnic was held. Include what you saw, heard, and smelled, and give your opinion about the location (whether you liked it or not). Provide support for your opinion. Remember to use connector words and adjectives.

Paragraph #3

Describe the food. Tell what kinds of food there were and how they looked, smelled, and tasted. Mention what you liked best and explain why. Ask at least two other people what they thought about the food and include their opinions in your paragraph. Practice reported speech.

Paragraph #4

Write a comparison/contrast paragraph. Make sure your first sentence is a topic sentence. You can compare two kinds of food or two activities, or you can compare this picnic to another picnic you have been to. Be careful to use the same points for each item you compare or contrast. Use connecting and comparison words (*but, on the other hand, similarly, both, etc.*).

Paragraph #5

Write a reaction paragraph in which you give an overall opinion of the picnic. Briefly tell what you liked and what changes, if any, you would make for a future picnic. Also, tell what you learned from this activity and whether you recommend doing it again.

Figure 1. A lower-level paragraph-focused assignment

The first steps are to plan the event and then prepare and send out invitations. One option is for the teacher to do all the planning and simply announce that there will be a class picnic (see the Appendix). Another option is to involve the students in the planning of many of the details, such as selecting the location and the food. In that case, the students can create invitations for each other, gaining a little extra writing practice. Either way, the invitations need to be sent out about two weeks before the picnic so that everyone can plan accordingly. Also, if invitations are sent out early, class discussions can focus on the picnic, and anticipation can build.

During the session before the scheduled picnic, you can give the class the picnic writing assignment. This is a task that incorporates the picnic into the curriculum of the writing class.

Since my lower-level writing classes focus on types of paragraphs, I assign a collection of prescribed paragraphs that will require the students to apply many of the writing types we have learned in class (see Figure 1). For example, I have them include a chronological paragraph with descriptive elements in which they tell about their journey to the picnic. I also have them include paragraphs about the food they ate or the activities that they participated in at the picnic. These can be descriptive paragraphs filled with adjectives along with delightful comparisons and contrasts. For the

final paragraph, I usually have the students offer their opinion about the picnic. They do this by summarizing what they liked about it and what they would change if they had a chance to have another picnic in the future.

For upper-level classes, I am more interested in how they can write a carefully thought-out essay (see Figure 2). I also want to check their ability to select one of the rhetorical forms we have been studying throughout the semester and successfully apply it to the topic of our class party. Some students may want to use a narrative essay, while others might be interested in comparing our class picnic to other class parties they have had, or maybe even to family parties. Others may like to focus on the process of preparing special dishes they brought to the picnic or how they planned and directed activities. Let's not forget about those students who like to express their opinions; they may prefer writing an argumentative essay telling why this was either the best or the worst class party they have ever been to. They may even include quotes, which they can collect from other students at the party, for evidence. Whatever type of essay each student writes, I find that giving the students freedom to decide how they want to tackle the writing assignment leads to more varied, interesting, and imaginative essays.

Adaptations to this teaching technique are numerous. First, the picnic doesn't have to be in the teacher's home. It can be held under

As you have heard, there is no such thing as a free lunch. This is the work you will do for the picnic lunch we are having on [date]. You will need to write a top-quality essay about the picnic. Select one of the rhetorical forms we have studied this semester (narrative, descriptive, chronological order, process, comparison/contrast, and argumentative). Follow the writing process by brainstorming, outlining, writing a draft, editing, making corrections, having someone else read your draft and offer suggestions, making more corrections, and then submitting a final typed copy. You will receive a grade on the work you turn in.

You might want to record your experience during the picnic by taking notes or pictures so that you can successfully recall elements to write about.

Figure 2. An upper-level essay-focused assignment

a tree or in a different part of the school. If necessary, it can be held in the classroom. Students can still describe how they came to school or how they journeyed to another part of the school. Also, the food can be simplified to include basic sandwiches, chopped vegetables, and potato chips—or local snacks and dishes that are easy to prepare. The invitations could also be handwritten or written on the board. The students themselves can prepare party games or activities to do at the picnic. Providing anything that would add to giving students content to write about is one of the goals of the picnic.

In addition, the writing task could take many forms. As mentioned, it could be a series of paragraphs or an essay. It could also be a

newspaper article, reporting on the event, or a blog entry complete with pictures (students should be aware of privacy concerns if this option is offered). Finally, the picnic could be broadened to include other classes and/or teachers. The more, the merrier.

Once again, whether it be a picnic with food or some other kind of activity, the idea is to do something real and out of the ordinary so that students can apply their writing skills to an experiential situation.

Dr. J. Perry Christensen has taught ESL/EFL classes in Tonga, Samoa, and Hawaii, where food and fun are part of the cultures. He currently teaches at Brigham Young University–Hawaii.

APPENDIX

An Invitation

Hear ye! Hear ye!

Let it be known near and far that students of the [name of the writing course] are cordially invited to attend a writing celebration picnic. This is an honorary event celebrating the diligent work that has been completed and the hard work yet to be achieved.

Please begin gathering at [location] after [time of day] on [date of the party]. Let the feasting begin at [mealtime].

The teacher will supply the following:

- succulent grilled chicken
- roasted hot dogs
- fresh baked buns
- velvety steamed rice

The teacher asks for a small submission on behalf of each participant. Please save chips and drinks from your partakings at the cafeteria and bring them to this celebration. If a desire to cook burns within your heart, you are invited to prepare a dish and share it with the class. Refreshments such as ice cream or cookies would be most appreciated, but not required.

After the feasting, there will be time for merrymaking before work and studies must resume. Feel free to bring games and activities, and be prepared to sing karaoke, join a game of musical chairs, pet the dog, or simply hang out for a few minutes.

Sincerely,

[Teacher's Name]

P.S. Be aware that there is no free lunch. Savor each morsel of food, each moment of laughter, and the time spent with each person you meet. Afterward, you will be writing about this marvelous event.