

## Stealing ideas to start the year “write”

I like to think of myself as the Robin Hood of ELA: I steal ideas from my rich-in-knowledge-and-experience colleagues, and give to my poor students. I admit, sometimes I take those ideas and give them my own signature style or flourish before delivery, but sometimes I just steal them wholesale. I mean, why mess with a good idea, right? With that in mind, I’d like to present to you, five non-original but totally rich activities to start your year off “write”. (Ha! Get it?)

### **1** The student-interest survey.

I’ve been fortunate to teach freshmen for the majority of my teaching career. These students are starting brand-new both to me and to the school, and what better way to know who they are than to have them answer some questions about themselves? My survey has about 20 questions on it, ranging from the basics (family, hobbies, etc.) to the content-specific (reading & writing strengths/weaknesses) to the purely for fun (“If you could spend an hour with any person, living or dead, who would it be and why? What would you do or talk about?”). Often, you can follow this up with the standard, “Chose one question and expand it into a paragraph.” While nothing fancy here, it gives an idea of who you’ll be working with throughout the year.

### **2** Index cards.

I stole this one from Dave Stuart, Jr.’s blog ([www.davestuartjr.com](http://www.davestuartjr.com)). On one side of the index card, the student writes his/her name nice and big. On the other side, the student answers two questions: What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of impact do you want to have? As he explains, these questions will do a lot more to tell you about a student than an open-ended question and will begin to lead them toward developing character. (Seriously, I really enjoy reading his blog. Check it out if you haven’t already.)

### **3** Acrostic name poem.

I mentioned earlier that I teach freshmen, but I feel this activity can be used for any age group. Students write their name down the side of the page. Each line of their poem starts with the letter of their name. To add a level of complexity, I require different things in each line, such as starting with participles, including at least five words per line, etc.

### **4** Creating your homepage for your website/ e-portfolio.

We are a Google school, and students should (theoretically) have their accounts set up before that first day of class. This year’s freshmen will be the first to complete an e-portfolio as part of their graduation requirement. I’ll be partnering with the guidance counselor on parts of the portfolio, so why not start by having them create their homepage, with their introduction to themselves? As long as the technology is working....

### **5** Letter to yourself as a senior.

In my small school, we keep writing portfolios for our students, physical folders where we store their most important writing pieces. Each year, we add major projects from our ELA classrooms to these folders, which students receive before they graduate. In this introductory letter, students reflect on who they are right now, and make plans for who they will be when they read this letter again before their graduation. My seniors loved reading these letters last May and reflecting on how far they’ve come.



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