



Essential Words: LTAB Online 2020

Lesson plans and writing prompts for teens



Writing as an Act of Archival

by Brittany Rogers

DURATION: 1.5 hours
GRADE LEVEL: Middle & School
WRITING LEVEL: Developing Writers
FOCUS: writing for posterity

EXAMPLE POEMS
[what you'd find buried...](#)
by francine j. Harris
[Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now](#)
by Matthew Olzmann

Check in | 15 minutes

*I write for young girls of color, for girls who don't even exist yet,
so that there is something there for them when they arrive.
I can only change how they live, not how they think.*
Ntozake Shange, Author

DISCUSSION | Many declare that the job of the writer is to act as an archivist, to document what is happening in the world. **Do you agree?** If so:

- Who are you writing for?
- What do you want them to know about you?
- What do you want them to know about culture?
- What do you want them to know about lineage?

Resource Building | 15 minutes

Imagine that someone comes upon your city or favorite place a century from now. Write about it.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What do they find?
- What do they see? Smell? What can they touch?
- What are the little, often overlooked details they notice?

Close Reading | 20 minutes

[what you'd find buried in the dirt under charles f. kettering sr. high school \(detroit, michigan\) by francine j. harris](#)
[Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years From Now by Matthew Olzmann](#)



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Both poems leave an archive of sorts for others to discover.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What do you learn about Kettering and, by default, Detroit?
- How does the speaker in “Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years From Now” describe society in 2020?
- What images stand out in these poems?
- Who do you imagine the audience to be for each of these poems?

Writing Prompt | 20 minutes

Select a significant time period or event in your life. **Using specific details of this event, write an archive for a future reader of this poem to find.**

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Who is your audience?
- How does the audience change the way you structure your poem and the language that you use?
- What do you want them to learn from your experience?
- What should they know about this time period in order to understand the speaker?

TIP | Engage your reader’s full range of senses!

Share Out | 15 minutes



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what you'd find buried in the dirt under charles f. kettering sr. high school (detroit, michigan)
by francine j. harris

blood:
soaked and caked on white socks, on blue mesh net t-shirts.
the band leader's blue baton and drum sticks.
matchbook sulfur spilled over newport cigarette butts.
condoms in a few dull shades. tenth-grade chemistry books
modeling atomic fatty acids.
half-sucked orange dum-dums tucked under detention slips.
pictures from *black hair* cut out for pre-beautician consensus.
broken black glitter belts with pink buckles shaped like lips.
candle wax from last year's vigil when
de'andre "*chucky*" brown collapsed in the arms of his
teammate. the teammate's shoe prints rocking back and forth
where the vigil was held, biting his lip.
broken cellphones. pieces of the black rubber mat
below the entrance way, which we crossed every morning,
teeth clenched. notes of consent that girls wrote, but didn't mean
and wish they hadn't passed back.
broken teeth. lost retainers. crumpled letters written to counselors
and discarded for illegible handwriting. phone lists of
abortion clinics. deflated valentine's day balloons with
trampled white ribbon. sales ads on bassinette sets.
my first boyfriend's piano scarf. a phyllis hymen
album cover. the path from the
exit door behind the school through which certain boys
would not see certain girls leave.
torn up progress reports.
brass knuckles. two
afro picks on opposite sides of the school. germs on a hall pass
from a boy holding his crotch.
rusty rebar dust. pigeon bones. stolen phone numbers.
d.o.t. bus passes from 1960, the year of the groundbreaking.
suspended driver's licenses. broken glasses from ice
packed into snowballs. unread pamphlets on
charles f. kettering, a farmer with bad eyesight,
who invented the electric starter
and an incubator for preemies.
possum tails. original scores. balled up journal entries
written and torched, detailing abuses. genital fluids.



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dna. envelopes from letters of acceptance
to states far away. math teachers' stolen answer keys
torn and burned by cigarette lighters.
cigarette lighters. hundreds of mcdonald's
fries containers because they flatten easily. weed.
imitation diamonds from homecoming tiaras
encrusted in shit-colored mud. research papers on kettering
detailing his treatments for
venereal disease
which involved heating up patients in thermal cabinets
until their body temperatures fevered at 130 degrees.
teachers' red pen marks on essay papers detailing abuses.
empty sprint cards.
a splint a football captain
was supposed to be wearing but decided made him look gay.
a *fat boys* tape. pieces of torn blue and white starter jackets
from the way boys wrestled each other
to the ground in spring.
my first poetry journal. pages of its poems
embossed with patterns of early name-brand gym shoes.
crumpled suicide notes written in pencil and scorched with ashes.
lost house keys. pictures of first crushes. bullets.
unpublished articles by frustrated teachers
who briefly looked into research findings,
using the charles f. kettering instrument of school
climate assessment detailing the psychological impact
on students from external stressors normally associated
with adulthood domestic patterns of abuse. fat shoelaces.
bullet casings. a jim beam whiskey flask that the old principal ditched
thinking someone was coming.
my last boyfriend's lesson plan elaborately structured
on the back
of a comic book. imprints of my mother's modest heel
from crossing the barren frontal square at my graduation.
free press articles on unnamed minors whose bodies were found
in dumpsters near kettering. the crystallized block formed
from the tissue my father handed me at graduation
for tears i couldn't explain.

[what you'd find buried in the dirt under charles f. kettering sr. high school \(detroit, michigan\)
by francine j. harris. Michigan Quarterly Review](#)



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Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years From Now by Matthew Olzmann

Most likely, you think we hated the elephant,
the golden toad, the thylacine and all variations
of whale harpooned or hacked into extinction.

It must seem like we sought to leave you nothing
but benzene, mercury, the stomachs
of seagulls rippled with jet fuel and plastic.

You probably doubt that we were capable of joy,
but I assure you we were.

We still had the night sky back then,
and like our ancestors, we admired
its illuminated doodles
of scorpion outlines and upside-down ladles.

Absolutely, there were some forests left!
Absolutely, we still had some lakes!

I'm saying, it wasn't all lead paint and sulfur dioxide.
There were bees back then, and they pollinated
a euphoria of flowers so we might
contemplate the great mysteries and finally ask,
"Hey guys, what's transcendence?"

And then all the bees were dead.

[Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years From Now by Matthew Olzmann, Academy of American Poets](#)