

Lisa Bullard ... Writing Road Trip

Time Capsule

A “Create-a-Character” Story-Writing Activity

This activity is a way for students to understand how authors use “telling details” to create individualized characters in their stories and biographical writing.

1. Explain to the students what a Time Capsule is.
2. Explain that students are going to create a Time Capsule for themselves. This might be a “hands-on” activity where they bring objects from home to place in a shoebox, or an “on paper” activity where they simply create a list of objects. Ask students to select 10-20 items that reveal their personality and lifestyle. These might include a family photograph, a pet toy, a sports trophy, or a t-shirt from a favorite vacation spot.
3. Encourage students to be specific: don’t just say “my favorite book,” list the title of the book. For paper lists, I also tell students they can break two of the “laws of science.” They can pretend that their favorite food won’t get moldy over time, and they can shrink down oversized objects to fit.
4. Make sure students have not written their names on their papers or in their shoeboxes. Redistribute the Time Capsules randomly around the room.
5. Students will immediately want to guess who created the Time Capsule they have ended up with. Allow brief speculation, but then tell them that it’s time to move on to the next step; the activity will be more fun if they wait to guess.
6. Ask students to create a completely new character based on the contents of the anonymous Time Capsule they now hold. Younger writers may only get as far as creating a simple character biography; older writers can be challenged to create a story featuring this new character. Emphasize to students that the aim is NOT to re-create the real person who developed the Time Capsule. The goal is to be as creative as possible in inventing a NEW character or story inspired by the Time Capsule contents. If a dog toy is in the Time Capsule, they might create a dog character. If there’s a CD, maybe their character is an “American Idol” wannabe! Students do not have to use all the objects in the Time Capsule.
7. Once students have created new characters from their Time Capsule items, invite them to share their writing. After each student has read, the class can then guess who created the anonymous Time Capsule that was the inspiration for that story.
8. Have students return the Time Capsules (and the pieces they wrote based on this inspiration) to the Time Capsule owners. Students love to read the writing their friends have generated using their Time Capsules!

You can also modify the exercise to be a twist on the traditional book report. Have students create Time Capsules for characters in the books they are reading, and then compare/contrast different characters’ Time Capsules.