Hero Narrative Writing Unit: Teacher’s Guide

By Sasha Domnitz, 5th grade teacher
Hunter College Elementary School
New York, New York.

Background: The Hero Project was a two-part fine art and language arts project undertaken in 2009 by 5th Grade students at Hunter College Elementary School in conjunction with Art and Remembrance. The students wrote and illustrated a story about a family member who had displayed hero qualities after listening to Bernice Steinhardt, watching an interview with Esther Nisenthal Krinitz, reading the book “Memories of Survival” and discussing events in Esther’s life that defined who she was, who she became, and how her courage and determination shaped her life. The Hero Project Gallery at www.artandremembrance.org presents the student’s art and written stories.

Credit where credit is due: Although I devised this writing unit, the structure of the lessons is based on the Lucy Calkins Writer’s Workshop. Several strategies are based closely or loosely on her work. The lessons are written in the language they were delivered. Much of this language is based on Ms. Calkin’s work. Additionally, ideas were drawn from the work of Ralph Fletcher.

I. Pre-writing

Lesson One: Hero Qualities

Lesson Aim: Students will create a “hero checklist” that includes 5 – 10 qualities that heroes possess.

Connection: We’re starting a new writing piece today called “The Hero Narrative.” you will be writing the story of hero from your own family. During this process, you’ll need to use all the writing techniques you’ve learned so far. You’ll also need to do some more advanced character development and some research in order to bring your story to life. Let’s read the overview of the assignment and then get started. Hand out and read through the Hero narrative assignment worksheet you have created. Hold off on taking too many questions, as many of them will be answered along the way. You will want to make it clear that students can select a member of their family that is living or deceased, someone they personally know/knew or someone that they’ve heard stories about growing up. They do not, nor should they, decide on the spot who they will write about at this point.

Teach: To begin this process, each of you will need to create an important definition. That is, you need to define for yourself what is a hero. Let’s begin that process together. I want each of you to begin by silently coming up with a list of 3 – 5 people you would consider a hero. Give students time to think. Then have them share out with the class. Write out a list of their suggestions. Include anywhere from 15 – 25 names. Okay, now you need to look at this list of heroes (or at least focus on the names that you consider to be heroes) and ask yourselves, “What qualities make those people heroes?” For instance, I see on that list the following people (ex. Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln). I wonder, do these people have certain characteristics in common that define them as heroes. Well, one thing that comes to mind for me is...
their bravery. Each of them bravely stood up against great forces in society to bring about a change. So, I’m going to list bravery as a heroic characteristic.

Active Involvement: I want you to choose some names off the list and try to list 3 – 5 characteristics that define these people as heroes. **Give students time to think silently. Then let them share with a partner. Then have them share out with the class. List these characteristics of a hero as well. Come up with a list of 10 – 20 characteristics. You’ll probably want to have this list hanging in the classroom throughout the course of the unit.**

**Link:** Now you’re going to do some writing in your writer’s notebook. I want you to look over this list we just created. Choose your top 3 – 5 characteristics for a hero and list them in your notebook. Then write about why those characteristics are essential for a person to be considered a hero. You may find while doing this that one characteristic emerges as the most important one for a hero. That’s good. Write about why that one characteristic is so important for a hero to possess.

### II. Gathering Seeds

**Lesson Two: Finding family heroes**

**Lesson Aim:** Students will identify heroes in their own families and write about why these people are heroes.

**Connection:** Last writer’s workshop we did the important job of defining what is a hero. Some of the characteristics we decided heroes usually possess are (read off the list created last lesson). Today, we’re going to start looking into our families and finding heroes from our own lives.

**Teach:** To begin with, you’re going to brainstorm a list of family members that could be considered heroes. While you’re doing this, remember that there are really two types of heroes – everyday heroes and historical heroes. An everyday hero is someone who changes the lives of people in his/her immediate surroundings. Everyday heroes usually do not become famous, nor do they receive the kind of credit, fame or recognition they probably deserve. An historical hero is a person who changes society in a way that reaches far beyond his/her immediate surroundings or experience. This type of hero usually does become famous and receive recognition; although sometimes the recognition doesn’t come until after the person has died. Some of you may have historical heroes in your family history; some of you may not.

So, you’ll begin by creating a list of 3 – 10 people in your family (living or dead) that you consider to be heroes. Then you’ll circle one name and briefly start writing that person’s story. At this stage, the writing doesn’t have to be detailed or even focused. However, if you’re inspired to tell the story in detail or to focus on a small moment in that person’s life rather than writing a general biography, then do that.

Watch and listen to me as I briefly go through the process I just described. **Model the process for the students.**