My name is Leah Raflik and I was an English intern at Marshfield High School who decided to figure out a way to get my class interested in screenplay writing. When I announced to my Creative Writing class that we would be beginning our unit on screenplay writing, I encountered a multitude of moans, groans, sighs, and whines. Figuring out a way to get 16 diverse young adults to take an interest in something they were clearly not fond of was a challenge I was both excited and nervous to undertake. There’s nothing worse than planning a lesson you’re sure will be a hit and finding it to be a complete and utter failure in practice.

I deliberated a great deal about how to best create a lesson that was both engaging and informative about screenplay writing. After much hemming and hawing, I finally created an activity that I felt accomplished both. I divided my class into three groups and began by explaining what we would be doing over the next half hour. I designed this lesson to give students practice with transposing a visual performance into an actual screenplay.

I handed each group a scenario that they could easily perform without words. For example, one of the scenarios was a food fight in the lunch room. The students in that group mimed going through a lunch line with a scuffle breaking out between two students. Then the whole group joined in and acted out throwing food across the room. All of this was done without words, but the audience could clearly tell what the group was portraying because of the obviousness of the situation and exaggerated actions of the group. The other scenario choices were familiar events that could easily be interpreted without words, much like the game Charades.

The lesson consisted of three “roles” and 3 groups. The roles were actors, audience, and hallway. The groups participated in each role once and rotated in a circular fashion. Group 1 began as the actor role, group 2 was the audience, and group 3 waited in the hallway while the skit was being performed. The acting group performed one of the scenarios I had created. They mimed out the scenario, not using any words, while the audience group took notes on their performance with the intent of turning it into a screenplay. The group in the hallway was out of sight so they couldn’t see what the acting group was performing. Once the scene had been completely mimed out, the groups

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The author shares an activity for introducing screenplay writing that she has used in her Creative Writing class.

Round Robin Screenplay Writing
rotated. The audience group gathered their notes and waited in the hallway, out of sight. They used this time to begin compiling their notes and writing the screenplay for what they just saw performed. Along with transcribing the actions they saw in the performance, they needed to add dialogue to the mimed scene, making the screenplay complete. The acting group became the audience group and the hallway group became the acting group, with a new scenario and the process repeated itself until each group had participated in each role once.

After each group has gone through the cycle, I instructed them to stay with their groups and finish writing their screenplays based on the scenario they had seen acted out. They needed about ten more minutes to complete their screenplays, since they were now adding dialogue in addition to the actions they witnessed. After they added the finishing touches to their screenplays, I asked them to give the screenplays they had written to the group that was in the hall while they were in the audience. I gave the groups a few minutes to rehearse their new scenes. Then, it was time to perform.

It surely was eye opening for the students to see how dramatically different some of the screenplay performances were compared to the original mime scene. They thoroughly enjoyed watching the screenplays performances, smiling and joking with students that misinterpreted their lines. After their laughter died down I had them write a brief reflection on what they learned from this activity. Many of them stated they needed to be clearer in their stage directions and descriptions. In the final performances, some students were speaking lines to the wrong people, but they didn’t know any better because it wasn’t included in their screenplays. They also realized they needed to improve on making their conversations seem natural and less scripted. Many students found while their invented lines conveyed the mood of the scene, they sounded forced and phony. When asked what improvements they would make for next time, majority of students responded they would spend more time adding detail to clarify their screenplays.

I loved this lesson because by the end of the class my students realized all the things they had to change about their writing in order to create a screenplay and they actually had fun doing it! I would greatly enjoy comments or any additional ideas concerning round robin screenplay writing sent to the journal.

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