

Prompt Tips

When you set out to create workable prompts, the following suggestions are a good thing to keep in mind:

Let the writer draw on experience.

- Avoid prompts that require specialized knowledge.

Allow choice.

- Use open-ended prompts with room for divergent responses.
- Allow for choice of topics within a prompt or provide a choice between two similar prompts.

Offer a prompt that will spark the writer's imagination.

Don't do the thinking for the writer.

- Too many suggestions within a prompt can be overwhelming.
- Highly creative or clever prompts sometimes backfire.
- Leave students room to go in their own directions.

Don't be nosy.

- Some students (and parents!) may resent prompts that require sharing personal details.
- Thoughtful wording can spark insight—even passionate beliefs—without putting a student in the hot seat.

Make the purpose clear.

- Good writing is good writing, but if you want student responses to fit a particular purpose, make sure that all expectations and criteria are explicit.

Prompts

- Write about a noise—or a silence—that won't go away.
- A man takes lunch to his wife's office, where he's told that she hasn't worked there in weeks.
- As you enter a café, the wind blows a piece of paper off a patron's table and carries it out the door. (S)he pushes past you but is unable to grab it before it goes down a storm drain. When he returns, he looks at you and says, "You've just killed me." What was so important about the paper? What happens next?

- Your postman is at the door with an unexpected package. What's in it? Who sent it? Is it important?
- Your pet goat is missing. There are eight likely, yet extremely different, suspects. Describe each suspect in detail, his motive and how the "goatnapping" occurred.
- Two cross-country skiers come across an isolated cabin. The front door is open, a hot meal is on the table, and a car is in the driveway, but no one appears to be home.
- You've discovered an underground shelter on the farm you just bought. Describe it. When was it built? What was it used for?
- Make a list of your elementary school teachers. Now write each teacher's worst trait. Create a character from these traits. Write a short story featuring this mean, rotten teacher.
- Something's rotten in your refrigerator. Write a scene in which the condiments residing in the door shelves plot to take over the prime real estate on the top shelf, front and center. Will milk be spilled? (And who'll be crying?)
- While waiting for your baggage at an airport, you notice a young woman at the baggage carousel. Although it's daytime, she's wearing a black strapless evening gown, high-heeled shoes and coordinated jewelry. She collects a box wrapped in brown paper. What's in the box? Who's she meeting? Why is she dressed to the nines at the airport?
- She hugged the tree as she looked down at the ground far below. How did she get in the tree? Why is she there? What happens next?
- Who would you like to have been in a past life? Who would you have hated to be? Write a scene of dialogue between those two.
- Print a copy of a well-known poem. Separate each word by cutting or printing on individual pieces of paper. Form a new poem with the words. Then rewrite your new poem substituting any words you want.
- Think about the first gift you remember receiving. Describe it. Who gave it to you? How did it make you feel?
- You're stranded in a library or bookstore for 24 hours. In what section do you spend the most time? Why?
- Write a description of yourself from your pet's point of view. Consider your appearance, actions, values, etc.

- You're unhappy with the politics in D.C. and decide to secede from the union and form your own country. Your country can only be as large as the land you own, whether it's a studio apartment or a cattle ranch. Describe your country. Do you plan to expand?
- Take song lyrics and write the background story to tell the song's inspiration.
- You're going to be on a new reality TV show. Describe the new show and your role on it.
- Pretend you're a cartoon character. What special powers would you have and what would you do with them?
- Think about your dream job. Now think about three aspects of that same job that wouldn't excite you.
- If you could go on only one more vacation in your lifetime, where would you go, and why?
- One day you awake to find you possess superhero powers. What kind do you have? Are you using them for good or evil?
- Write a letter to your future husband, wife, child, etc., and tell them about your life before they came into it. If that person is already in your life, write from your past perspective.
- At what moment in your life did you feel most proud? Write an essay about the experience.
- Describe your father: his hang-ups, strengths, and mannerisms. What does he look like? What are your feelings toward him?
- Write a story about a character born on February 29. How does he feel when it's not a leap year and his birthday doesn't come?
- Think about the qualities you seek in a mate. Write a character description of someone who looks and acts the complete opposite.
- Your mother-in-law (pretend, if you don't have one) succeeded in lying to the rest of the family, but you know the truth. Would you snitch and expose her? Write the scenario.
- If you could talk to any literary character, who would it be, and what would you ask him or her?

- Pick five words at random. Using a thesaurus, find an alternative for each word. Write a story using all 10 of them.
- What is something you dislike about yourself?
- What is something you do well?
- What is your favorite room in your home and why?
- What is a good neighbor?
- What is the worst thing parents can do to their children?
- What is your favorite time of day?
- What is your idea of a dull evening?
- What is the best way to treat meddlesome people?
- What is something you are optimistic about?
- What is something you are pessimistic about?
- What is the meaning of "He laughs best who laughs last"?
- What is your favorite song and why?
- What is the best birthday present you ever received?
- What is the best birthday present you could receive?
- What is something that makes you feel sad?
- What is your favorite book and why?
- What is something that really makes you angry?
- What is the best advice you ever received?
- What is your favorite holiday? What makes this holiday special?
- What is your favorite month? Why?
- What would happen if you could fly whenever you wanted? When would you use this ability?

- What would happen if there were no television? Why would this be good? Bad?
- What would happen if everyone lived in space? What type of houses would they live in? What type of clothing would they wear? What type of food would they eat? How would they travel?
- What if cows gave root beer instead of milk?
- What if all the streets were rivers? What would be different?
- What would happen if people never cooperated? Why do you think it is important to cooperate?
- What would happen if it really did rain cats and dogs?
- What would happen if animals could talk? What are some of the questions you would like to ask animals?
- What would happen if you could become invisible whenever you wanted to? What are some of the things you could do that you cannot do now?
- What would happen if everyone wore the same clothes?
- What would happen if you threw a piece of trash on the ground? What if everyone did?
- What if you could walk up walls and across ceilings?
- What would happen if you loved your neighbor as yourself? What if everyone did?
- What would happen if you grew taller than trees? How would this change your life?
- What would happen if children ruled the world?
- What would happen if there were no cars, buses, trains, boats, or planes? How would this change your life?
- What if everyone lived underwater? Where would people live? What games would children play? What would school be like?
- What would happen if you found gold in your backyard?

- What would you do if a bully bothered you on your way home?
- What would you do if a friend borrowed things from you but never returned them?
- What would you do if you were the teacher and everyone forgot his homework?
- What would you do if you were in the middle of the lake and your boat began to leak?
- What would you do if your friend had a broken leg? How would you cheer him or her up?
- What would you do if you saw little bugs in your salad?
- What would you do if you woke up in another country and no one could understand you?
- What would you do if you ordered an ice cream cone and you forgot to bring money?
- What would you do if someone got in front of you when you were in line at the movies?
- What would you do if your jelly sandwich fell upside down on the floor?
- What would you do if you were at home and your homework was at school?
- What would you do if you were invited to two parties on the same day?
- What would you do if you promised to feed your pet and you didn't?
- What would you do if someone said you did something wrong and you didn't?
- What would you do if your new shoes felt fine in the store but now they are hurting?
- What would you do if an hour before the party you remember you don't have a gift?
- What would you do if you had four math problems marked wrong that were right?
- What would you do if you found a magic wand?

- What would you do if you wanted to be friends with someone who spoke no English?
- What would you do if you saw a friend cheating—report it, confront the friend, nothing—and why?
- If you could have been someone in history, who would you have been?
- If you could only take 3 people with you on a trip around the world, whom would you take and why?
- If you could give any gift in the world, what would you give and to whom?
- If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
- If you received any sum of money as a gift, what would you do with it?
- If you could do whatever you wanted to right now, what would you do?
- If you were principal of this school, what would you do?
- If you were a mouse in your house in the evening, what would you see your family doing?
- If you were five years older you would...?
- If you were lost in the woods and it got dark, what would you do?
- If it were your job to decide what shows can be on TV, how would you choose?
- If there were no rules, what do you think would happen?
- If you owned a store, what would you do to discourage people from stealing from you?
- If you had to describe yourself as a color, which would you choose, and why?
- If your friend told you of a secret plan to run away from home, what would you do and why?
- What do you think of 3D movies?
- What do you think someone your age can do to help reduce the amount of pollution in our environment?

- What do you think the world needs now?
- What do you think your friends say to each other when you're not around?
- What do you think about the amount of violence on TV?
- What do you think about people polluting the environment?
- What do you think about having set rules for people to follow?
- What do you think about people who are inconsiderate of others?
- What do you think should be done to keep people who are under the influence of alcohol off the road?
- What do you think the world will be like when you are a grown-up?
- What do you think about ghosts?
- What do you think of someone who has bad manners?
- What do you think about people who take advantage of others?
- What do you think about when you can't fall asleep?
- What do you think courage means?
- What do you think makes a good friend?
- What do you think makes a happy family?
- What things do you think are beautiful?
- What do you like to do in your free time?
- What kind of animal would you like to be and why?
- What TV or movie star would you like to invite to your birthday party?
- What does "Clothes make the person" mean to you?
- What does "Have your cake and eat it too" mean to you?
- What does "The early bird gets the worm" mean to you?

- What do we mean when we say, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence"?
- What are some examples of prejudice?
- What is more important to you, appearance or personality?
- What is most important to you in a friend—loyalty, generosity, or honesty, and why?
- What would you do if you were principal for a day?
- If you could change places with anyone, who would it be and why?
- If you were an animal, what kind would you be and why?
- What is silence to you?
- What is your favorite season?
- What is your favorite animal? If you were this animal what would you do? (where does it live, what does it eat, how does it protect itself, etc.)
- Write a list of things you'll never do.
- Describe your perfect house.
- What are 10 types of food or dishes you've never eaten that you'd like to try?
- What is the nicest thing you've ever done for someone else?
- What makes your best friend your best friend?
- What makes you laugh?
- What would you invent to make life better?
- What would you do to entertain your family without spending any money?
- What effects does watching violence have on people?
- What effects do cigarette and alcohol advertising have on young people?
- What kind of TV commercial would you like to make? Describe it.

- What kind of pet would you most like to have—monkey, snake, goat—why?
- What kind of program do you enjoy most on TV—detective shows, comedies, game shows—and why?
- What advice would you give a new student?
- What advice would you give to someone who stole something but now feels guilty?
- What things are better than going to school? Why?
- What talents do you have?
- What four things are most important in your life?
- What has been the most fun activity at school so far?
- What quality do you like about yourself—creativity, personality, appearance, etc., and why?
- What eccentric behavior in a friend disturbs you the most?
- What parts of nature do you like best?
- What do you do for exercise?
- How do you feel when you do something that is very good?
- How do you feel when you want something very badly and you cannot have it? Why is this so important to have?
- How do you feel during a thunderstorm?
- My hero is... (Tell me why.)
- How do you feel on the first day of school?
- How would you change the world to make it better?
- When you are angry, how do you look?
- When might it be bad to be honest?

- If I could get anything in the world for my birthday, it would be ... (Tell me what you'd do with it.)
- Which is least important to you—money, power, fame—and why?
- Which is most important to you—being popular, accomplishing things, being organized—and why?
- Where would you prefer to be right now—mountains, desert, beach—and why?
- Why is it important to be honest?
- Why is important to have good manners?
- Why do you think adults smoke/drink?
- Why do you think some people encourage others to smoke/drink?
- Why is it wise to not squander your money?
- Should there be a dress code in places such as school, restaurants, and places of business? Why or why not?
- Would you like to be famous? Why or why not? What would you like to be famous for?
- Use the prompts below to write a story or poem.

1. The snow is falling and I can't see two feet in front of me ...

2. The snowman was as still as a ...

3. I would rather be in a warm climate in January because...

4. I love the snow because ...

5. Splat! Splat! Another snowball ...

6. The icicles hung dangerously from the old house ...

7. Sitting by the warm fire I heard the crackle ...

8. The weather outside is frightful ...

9. My boot is stuck! What am I going to ...
10. I was sledding down the biggest slope when ...
11. I was ice skating on the pond when I could see a reflection ...
12. Martin Luther King believed that ...
13. Peace is important because ...
14. I am peaceful when I ...
15. My goals for the New Year are ...
16. Last year I had the best time when I ...

More Prompts

- Rewrite a fairy tale from a different point of view. For instance,
 - *The Three Pigs* as the wolf would tell it
 - *Hansel & Gretel* as the witch would tell it
- Think of an event you will want to remember when you are old. Tell about what happened in a way that's so clear that if you read this story again when you are eighty, every detail will come flooding back as if it happened yesterday.
- Think of a place that's so special to you that you just love thinking about it. It might be as big as a city, or as small as one corner of a room. Tell one story that comes to mind when you think of this place.
- Write a letter that your grandchildren will open in 50 years telling them what the world is like today.
- Think of something you have done that brought you satisfaction, pleasure, or a sense of accomplishment. Write about that activity or event and tell why it sticks in your mind.
- Think of a person you know had that you will remember for a long, long time. Describe this person so clearly that your reader will know just what made you remember him or her.
- Think of something you made with your own hands. How did you do it? What might you do differently next time? Write an explanation so clear and complete that someone with little to no experience could follow your directions and make

the same thing.

- Many parents worry about helping their students be successful in school. Create a piece of writing that could become a how-to brochure for parents: *How to Help Your Child Succeed in School*.
- Inventions are all around us. Think of an invention that has been especially helpful or harmful to people, and write a paper that explains why.
- Write an essay in which you strongly and clearly AGREE OR DISAGREE (but NOT both!) with ONE of the following:
 - Fads never really go out of style.
 - Life in the 21st century will be better than ever.
 - People are happier than they used to be.
 - Americans are too concerned with material goods.
 - You can tell a lot about people by what they eat.
 - You can tell a lot about people by what they read.
 - The Internet is the best thing to ever happen to education.
- People worry too much about _____. Fill in the blank with any topic you like. Then, write a paper that supports your statement. Convince others to agree with you.
- Write a paper in which you AGREE OR DISAGREE with this statement:
It's more fun to be a child than to be an adult.
- Think of ONE thing about television advertising you would like to see changed. Then, write a letter to the Advertising Council explaining the change you want and the reasons you think this change is important.
- "The most important quality any person can have is a sense of humor." Do you agree or disagree? Write a paper in which you take a clear stand, agreeing or disagreeing with this statement, and explain your position so the reader can understand fully why you came to feel the way you do.
- Write a convincing paper in which you agree or disagree with this statement: "Life was easier for teenagers 50 years ago than it is for teenagers today."
- Write an essay proposing a new national holiday. You anticipate that there might be people who don't agree with your idea, so defend your reasoning by explaining the meaning and background of the event/person and why a national holiday is justified. You could describe how the holiday should be observed or celebrated.
- Many famous people, both real and fictional, have been honored by having their faces on postage stamps. Choose a real or fictional person who you feel deserves this honor. Write a paper that would persuade others your choice is good.

- If you were asked to select an item to place in a time capsule, what would it be? Choose an item that exemplifies the culture of the early part of the 21st century. Explain the item's use and significance, and justify why your item should be included in the time capsule.
- You have awakened as an inanimate object. Write a letter telling a human friend what your new life is like.
- You are about to drive across the country. You can take one other person with you. Who would you take? Why would you take that person?
- Your little brother or sister is lost—or you are so frustrated that you want to sell him or her! Write an ad to place in the paper that will help you locate—or sell—your sibling.
- You have just been chosen to be king or queen of a new country. Are you looking forward to your new role? What will be the best thing about being in that position? The worst thing?
- Today is your birthday, and everybody in your family has forgotten about it. How do you feel? How can you hint to them that this is your important day without coming right out and telling them?
- Imagine that you woke up one morning to find you had grown two extra pairs of arms. Write a story about a day in your life with these extra limbs. Consider how your life changes for the better and for the worse. Also consider how your family, friends and classmates react, what you can do that was not possible before you got the extra arms, and what you can't do now because of all these arms.
- Pick something that exists in the present but might not exist in the future. Imagine getting a visit from a time traveler who wants you to explain what the object is and what it does and why it is so important to this time.
- Imagine that you were out for a walk and came across an animal that could talk to you. Write the conversation you and that animal would have. Remember, the animal would be as interested in you as you would be in it.
- Imagine that one morning a neighbor discovers a mysterious shape in the grass in his backyard. He knows you like a mystery and calls you over. Write a story about what you think the shape is, how it got there, and who made it. It must be a story your neighbor finds hard to believe.
- Most of us have worn something we did not like or want to wear. Either imagine a situation like this or remember one that happened to you. Write a story about what happened one time when you had to dress in something you did not want to wear.

- Imagine you have found a baby wild animal that seems to be injured. Write a narrative about the adventures and misadventures when you bring the animal home and decide to keep it as a pet. Remember, small wild animals grow into big wild animals.
- Do you have a vivid memory from childhood? Write a narrative about the memory and include what it was, why it was important and made it so memorable. Everyone is afraid of something—heights, spiders, or flying, just to mention a few. What do you fear the most? Write a story about a situation in which you had to face your fear. Indicate what happened and what you did to overcome the fear or if it still frightens you today.
- Many young people enjoy favorite hobbies or activities outside of school. These can include sports, dance, music, or collecting special items, to name a few. Think about an activity or hobby you have or would like to have. Describe this special interest and explain why it is important to you.
- If you could travel to any place in the world, where would you go? Who would you like to bring along with you. In a passage, give at least four reasons why you would like to visit this place and what you would expect to do there. A little research on this place via some library books or the Internet will help.
- Do you have something that is especially important to you. It could be something you found, made, or has been given to you. Write a passage explaining what this item is and why it is important to you.
- Our town is surrounded by a forest, so we see trees everywhere and everyday. Many of our homes have trees around them too. Trees are important to us in many ways. They are used to make paper products and to provide enjoyment. In what ways are trees important to you and your family? Write a passage about the importance of trees and the forest. Some research may be required.
- Children spend a lot of time watching television. Have you thought much about the programs and advertisements you watch? Can you tell the difference between what happens on television and what is real? Write a passage that demonstrates that you do know the difference.
- All of us have had a special time or adventure in our lives. It could be anything such as a visit with a friend or relative, a party you went to, or a game you watched or played. Or it could be something completely different. Write a story about a special time or adventure that you have had. Give enough details in your story to show what it was like and what made it so special.
- Think about a friend who has been an important part of your life. How did you become friends with this person? Think about when you met, what you did, and how

your friendship grew. Write a story about this friendship. Give enough details to tell the reader about this friendship.

- Think of a change to a place that you know well, and narrate the events that occurred. Readers should know the details of the change, and they should know how you feel about the changes that occurred.