Ideas and activities to help adult learners generate a piece of writing, as part of Scottish Book Trust’s Treasures

Created by Scottish Book Trust
Is there an object you will always treasure?

Scottish Book Trust is collecting your stories about your most treasured objects. Is there a special something that has touched or shaped your life?

It could be from your past or your present, but you’ll never forget it. Whether it is cheap or expensive, it is priceless to you. Whatever or wherever it is, whether it is yours or lives in a museum, has passed down through your family, was found on a beach, a gift, a souvenir or an everyday object, your Treasure holds a story, the story of what it means to you.

Suggested approach

These notes provide a suggested approach for Adult Literacy Tutors to use with any of their learners who would like to take part in Scottish Book Trust’s Treasures.

Adult learners can submit creative writing or a personal piece of writing inspired by an object they treasure.

Your groups can be creative about how they write and submissions can take a variety of formats, such as:

- a story,
- a poem or a riddle,
- a diary entry,
- a letter,
- a sketch or a scene (like a short play),
- an article (newspaper or magazine) a personal piece of writing

Any object that means something to them, or someone they know, could be the treasured thing they write about, for example:

- a favourite shoe,
- a gift,
- something they use linked to a hobby or sporting activity,
- an heirloom,
- an object from nature,
- or a piece of history linked to their community or family.

The object can be big or small, whatever they like, as long as there is some background story which gives us a bit of context to the treasured thing. For example, explain its origin, who it currently or used to belong to and how, where and why the current owner came to treasure it.
Activity ideas to support the writing process

STARTING POINT

Extracts from the following three books can be read by the learners themselves, or read to the learners, as appropriate.

These extracts can then be used to help your learners’ imaginations start to flow and to stimulate ideas for their own pieces of creative writing. The common thread throughout is that people’s stories come from a variety of sources and that everyone has a story to tell whether they know it or not!
EXTRACT 1: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE’S MOST TREASURED THING – POCKET WATCH

It was a very odd watch. It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the edge.

(Extract and image from Harry Potter – The Philosopher’s Stone by J.K. Rowling)

This watch was used in the opening chapter of the first ever Harry Potter book Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone. It belonged to Albus Dumbledore and was made of gold, had twelve hands, and rather than numbers, planets moved around the edge of its face. Despite this, it could still be used to tell the time, as he used it to work out that Hagrid was running late, when he was to deliver Harry Potter to 4 Privet Drive in 1981. This was just before Harry was whisked off to begin his first term at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Albus Dumbledore was Headmaster of this school and considered by many to be the greatest Headmaster ever, as well as the most powerful wizard of his time. He was tall and thin, with silver hair and beard (auburn in his youth) so long that both his beard and his hair could be tucked into his belt. He had a very long and crooked nose that looked as if it had been broken at least twice. And he was also said to have long and skillful fingers. His eyes were described to be a brilliant, soul-piercing shade of blue, and usually twinkled with kindness and mischief.

So Dumbledore and his watch were instrumental in the beginning of all of Harry Potter and his school friends’ adventures.
In this fictional example J.K. Rowling uses descriptive words to portray what the watch (from her imagination) looked like, as well as giving detailed descriptions of its owner and where it occurred, as part of her story. The following exercise is good for practising this type of scene setting for fictional pieces of creative writing.

a) As a starting point bring in a box of objects (and/or ask your learners to bring in an object to contribute to this collection). Then get your learners to pick one object each.

b) Next either read to your learners or ask them to read to each other, the above example that describes J.K. Rowling’s character the wizard Dumbledore and his treasured watch.

c) Then, to experiment with this approach, split your learners into pairs and ask each pair to think of the object they have selected from the box as their treasured thing.

d) Each pair should now write their treasured thing as a heading on some flipchart paper and under each heading note down a list of words to describe it.

e) These lists should then be swapped with another pair and the new pair should discuss how they could turn the list of words they have just received into a descriptive piece of writing. To support this provide the following instructions:

   i. They should use their imaginations to place each treasured thing in an environment, ie. set the scene. Ask: ‘Where would their treasured thing live or where is it likely to be located? Describe this location in as much detail as possible: what would you see, hear, touch or taste in this environment?’

   ii. Next the pairs should again use their imaginations to describe the person they imagine would treasure it. To help to generate ideas ask: ‘What do they look like? What clothes do they wear? Do they have any significant features on their face? Hair colour? Likes and dislikes? What would they feel about their treasured thing?’

f) The pairs should then describe the place and person in as much detail as possible and they should be encouraged to let their imaginations flow. When they have enough ideas these should be written down by the learners themselves and/or with the support of a scribe (as appropriate).

g) Finally, as occurred in the Dumbledore’s pocket watch example, the finished piece should contain:

   - detailed descriptions of the favourite thing (including all the words from the original list),
   - a full description of who it belongs to,
   - where it would be located,
   - and finally finish the piece by adding why it is significant and treasured by its owner, perhaps in the context of a particular story surrounding the treasured thing.
...No one but me, however, can pack the bottles into my bag, along with my clothes and towels and books and shades and wristbands. (My rackets, as always, go in later.) No one but me touches my tennis bag, and when it’s finally packed, it stands by the door, like an assassin’s kit, a sign that the day has lurched that much closer to the witching hour...

Now we pull up to the stadium. Fans are milling about. I head straight to the training room after signing a few autographs. My trainer Darren comes in carrying eight freshly strung rackets. He sets them atop my bag. He knows I want to place them in the bag myself.

I obsess about my bag. I keep it meticulously organised, and I make no apologies for this anal retentiveness. The bag is my briefcase, suitcase, toolbox, lunchbox and palette. I need it just right, always. The bag is what I carry onto the court, and what I carry off, two moments when all my senses are extra acute, so I can feel every ounce of its weight. If someone were to slip a pair of socks into my tennis bag, I’d feel it. The tennis bag is a lot like your heart – you have to know what’s in it at all times.

It’s also a question of functionality. I need my eight rackets stacked chronologically in the tennis bag, the most recently strung racket on the bottom and the least recently strung on the top, because the longer a racket sits, the more tension it loses. I always start a match with the racket strung least recently, because I know that’s the racket with the loosest tension.

...James the security guard leads us into the tunnel. James has been at the U.S. Open for almost as long as I have. Now, walking me out to the practice courts, he’s not chuckling. He looks sad. He knows that this could be our last night together. Still, he doesn’t deviate from our pre-match ritual. He says the same thing he always says:

Let me help you with that bag.
No, James, no one carries my bag but me.

I’ve told James that when I was seven years old I saw Jimmy Connors make someone carry his bag, as though he was Julius Caesar. I vowed then and there that I would always carry my own bag.

Ok, James says, smiling. I know, I know. I remember.
Just wanted to help.
Then I say: James, you got my back today?
I got your back, baby. I got it. Don’t worry about nothing.
Just take care of business.

We emerge into a dusky September night. I hit balls for twenty-eight minutes. I don’t know why I notice these details – the length of an afternoon shower, the duration of a practice session, the colour of James’s shirt. I don’t want to notice, but I do, all the time, and then I remember forever. My memory isn’t like my tennis bag; I have no say over its contents. Everything goes in, and nothing ever seems to come out…”

(Extract from Open – an autobiography by Andre Agassi)

EXERCISE 2: APPROACHES THAT HELP TO ‘DEVELOP PERSONAL WRITING’

Andre Agassi provides his own personal, moving insight into his tennis playing experiences in his autobiography Open and many of your learners may relate to his sporting achievements, heart aches, joys and struggles. In the above extract from his book, he provides key details into his life, by writing about his most treasured thing, which is not, as might be assumed, a tennis racket, but instead his sports bag. He writes about it in the context of his day to day realities.

The following exercise encourages learners to try this personal, autobiographical approach. They will create a piece of factual writing about something they treasure and in the same way that the extract about Andre's bag tells us something about the man himself, learners will use a treasured object linked to their hobby or sport, to give insight into their world.

For example, it may be that writing is their new hobby and so they could explain that their writing desk is their treasured thing. They could set the scene by touching upon its history and/or its location in their house or shed in the garden etc. They could also describe what they look like when they are writing as well as the other participants in their writing group.
a) As a starting point read the above extract from *Open* by Andre Agassi, to your learners or ask them to read it to each other.

b) Follow up the reading by discussing the difference between an autobiographical piece of writing and a fictional piece. Explain that Andre’s autobiographical account of his sports bag is made up from his thoughts and memories of actual times in his life, whereas the first example describing Dumbledore’s pocket watch is created from J.K. Rowling’s imagination.

c) Highlight to your learners how Andre focuses on the actual bag and how and why he uses it in the way he does, describing it in a context and then encourage your learners to experiment writing for a real audience about actual events in the same way.

d) In order to do this start a discussion around what actually happened to illustrate how and why his particular treasured thing, his sports bag, became significant to him. Then ask your learners to consider a hobby or sport they take part in. Ask them to talk about the environment as well as the people in it. Ask them to describe:
   i. What the hobby or sporting activity is?
   ii. What they like or dislike about it?
   iii. Where it takes place?

e) Next they should describe themselves and others who take part (if applicable) in the hobby or sporting activity. They should describe:
   i. How those involved (including themselves) look
   ii. Their experiences and thoughts about the hobby or sporting activity

f) Finally, they should write a short piece about the significant treasured object linked to the sport or hobby and describe the object by weaving it into the information they have just written, including their thoughts about the sport or hobby as well as the environment and where relevant other people involved with it.

EXERCISE 2: EXTENSION OPTION

g) To extend this exercise further ask your learners to, individually, do some research at their local library and/or on the internet to gather as much background and/or history surrounding their ‘treasured thing’ as possible. Once this has been collected they should share their findings with the rest of the group before adding it into their piece of writing, perhaps providing an historical account about how different social or economic happenings over the years may have influenced the treasured thing and/or community or team in which it has been part of, over time.

h) If the learners would like to choose a different format for this piece of writing they could experiment with writing a scene from a play and add some dramatic conflict (real or imagined) between the characters from the community and the treasured object. For example if the treasured thing is a bike and it is used by the learner to compete in triathlons they may like to write about the day the wheel was sabotaged with nails but they won the race despite this!
There’s an empty notebook lying on the table in the moonlight. It’s been there for an age. I keep on saying that I’ll write a journal. So I’ll start right here, right now. I open the book and write the very first words:

**MY NAME IS MINA AND I LOVE THE NIGHT...**

Then what shall I write? I can’t just write that this happened then this happened then this happened to boring infinitum. I’ll let my journal grow just like my mind does, just like a tree, or a beast does, just like life does. Why should a book tell a tale in a dull straight line?

Words should wander and meander. They should fly like owls and flicker like bats and slip like cats. They should murmur and scream and dance and sing.

Sometimes there should be no words at all.

Just silence.

Just clean white space.

Some pages will be like a sky with a single bird in it. Some will be a sky with a swirling swarm of starlings in it...”

(Extract from *My Name Is Mina* by David Almond)

**EXERCISE 3: APPROACHES THAT HELP TO DEVELOP CREATIVE WRITING AND POETRY**

The final extract above is from David Almond’s fictional story about a little girl called Mina who is home schooled and trying to find her place in the world. The author uses a diary entry approach to demonstrate how Mina’s most treasured thing is her journal. Here the author describes Mina’s thoughts about what she should actually write in her journal and this also gives the reader an insight into other aspects of her character at the same time. After reading this piece, ask your learners to take part in the following preparatory exercise:
a) Ask your learners to think about their most treasured thing. The treasured thing should be an object that means something to them, for example:
- a favourite shoe,
- a gift,
- something they use linked to a hobby or sporting activity,
- an heirloom,
- an object from nature
- or a piece of history linked to their community or family.
Big or small, whatever they like, they should include something about its origin, who it used to belong to and/or how, where and why they came to treasure it.

b) Now they should write down a list of words and/or short sentences that describe it without saying what it actually is ie. describe smells and sounds associated with it, what it looks like and feels like. They should use as many descriptive words as possible.

c) Once they have their list describing their treasured thing without actually mentioning what it is, they can then start to introduce emotions, in other words, what their feelings are associated with this treasured thing.

d) Finally, they should then write down these emotional descriptions and incorporate them with their initial descriptions and only reveal in the last line what their treasured thing actually is!

e) Finally, drawing upon the above descriptions, set your learners the challenge to write a poem or riddle about their favourite thing using ten lines only. Again encourage them to incorporate the words in their original list.

EXERCISE 3: EXTENSION OPTION

f) Some shared reading can also be added into this activity by setting your learners the task of taking or finding photographs of their treasured thing, and turning their poems into a short illustrated picture book. They can then read it together with their children if they have any, or their friends’ or colleagues’ children, as appropriate.

g) To extend this exercise further you can highlight a poem’s use of language to your learners by taking the original copies of their poems, and then let them see new copies with some of the key descriptive words blanked out.

h) The idea is to see if they can add in new descriptive words, and then discuss which words they think work best and why ie. which ones best capture their treasured thing the original or the replaced words? They should then write out a final version of their poem and explain to the group why they selected certain words and not others ie, which words were memorable and effective and why they have picked them instead of other choices etc.

This is a good exercise to demonstrate the importance of self editing during the creative writing and creative poetry process.
Further exploration

Further ideas you might like to explore to encourage creative writing or personal writing with your learners following the theme of Treasures:

- Bring in a box of objects and get your learners to pick one and write an imaginative piece about it.
- Create a comic strip of your treasured object with descriptive text under each illustration. To help you develop this activity go to www.comiclife.com
- Ask your learners what treasured object they would include in a time capsule? Consider objects that currently define our time. They could create a magazine article about this treasured object and include a lost and found poster.
- Compare and contrast objects throughout time – what do they treasure more, their modern day mobile or their grannie’s dial telephone? What do they like and dislike through the different ages.

Conclusion

Finally, after completing one or all of the above preparatory exercises your learners can choose the one they would like to submit to Scottish Book Trust’s Treasures. Or if they prefer they can write a new piece in any of the following formats and submit that entry instead, for example:

- a story,
- a poem or a riddle,
- a diary entry,
- a letter,
- a sketch or a scene (like a short play),
- an article (newspaper or magazine)
- a personal piece of writing
Submission details

The entries can be short in length or longer but no longer than 1,000 words in total. The final date for submissions is 31st July 2013.

Entries should be pasted into the body of the webpage entry form found at the following location: www.scottishbooktrust.com/treasures

All entries will appear on Scottish Book Trust’s web site and promoted through Book Week Scotland which will take place from Monday 25th November to Sunday 1st December 2013. In addition a selection of stories will also be entered into a book that will be distributed throughout Scotland.

All entries will be available in digital format at: www.scottishbooktrust.com/treasures