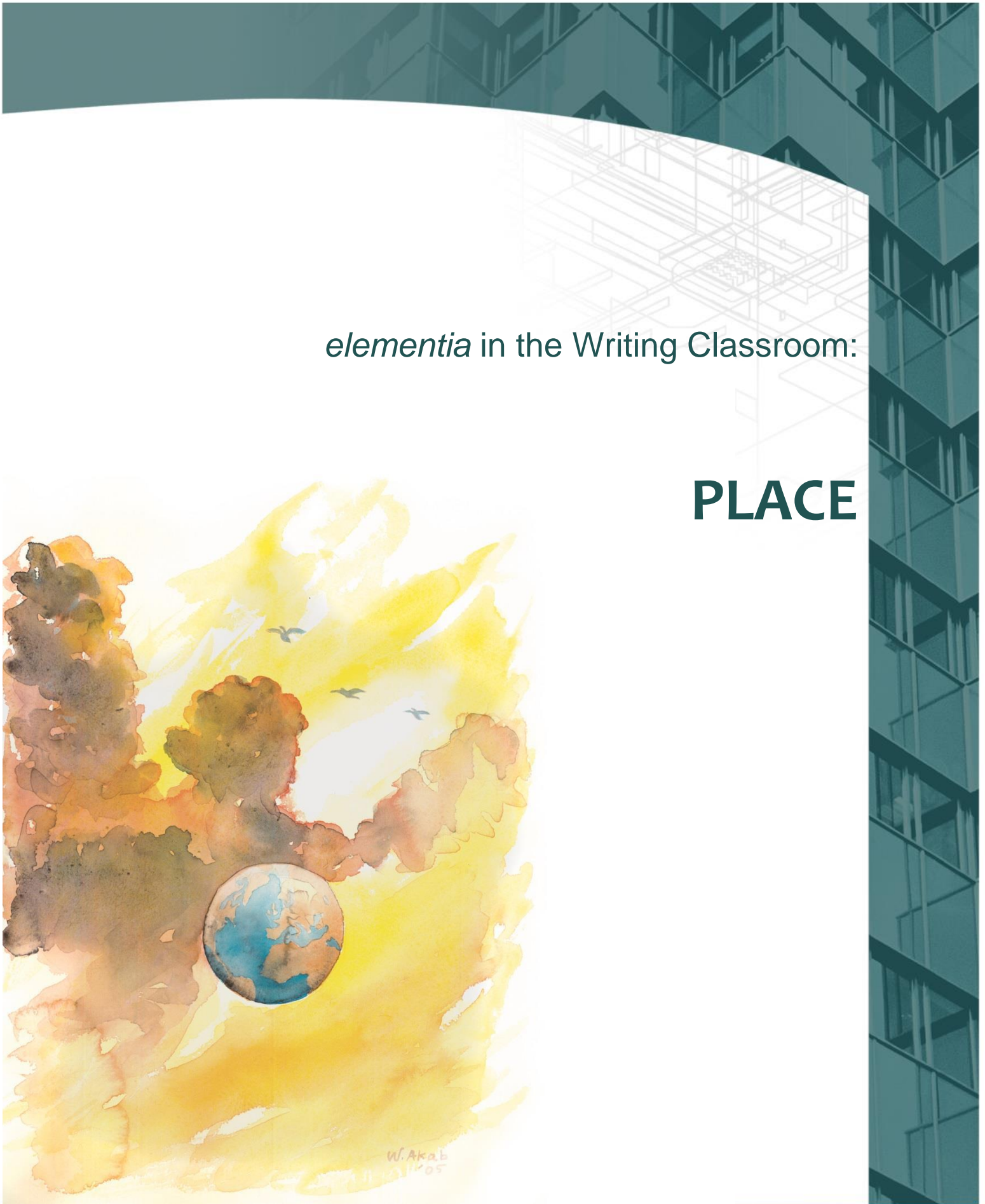


elementia in the Writing Classroom:

PLACE



ELEMENTIA 2015

THEME

Your perspective on a place depends on where you are standing.

Where is your place?
What is your place?
When is your place?
Who is your place?
Why?

Our twelfth issue is dedicated to poet and National Book Award finalist, Naomi Shihab Nye, who will attend the author reception on Tuesday, March 3, 2015.

Nye's work often revolves around the topic of place. Authors and artists are encouraged to use her work as an inspiration for their submissions.

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Writing In Place

The following ideas relate to the theme of our 12th issue:
PLACE.

*Noise Poem: Onomatopoeia, Figurative Language

Listen to the sounds of burning paper in Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, below.

Use the Noise Poem prompt to experiment with the sounds that define a place.

Burning the Old Year

By Naomi Shihab Nye

Letters swallow themselves in
seconds.
Notes friends tied to the doorknob,
transparent scarlet paper,
sizzle like moth wings,
marry the air.

So much of any year is flammable,
lists of vegetables, partial poems.
Orange swirling flame of days,
so little is a stone.

Where there was something and
suddenly isn't,
an absence shouts, celebrates,
leaves a space.
I begin again with the smallest
numbers.

Quick dance, shuffle of losses and

*Alternating Lines: Repetition, Rhythm

Educator and poet [Kenneth Koch](#) developed this poem form, and it is particularly useful for reluctant writers.

Koch's original form began: "I used to be... But now I..."

Students are welcome to invent their own opening lines for the form in order to tell the story they have in mind.

Other suggestions:

"Before... After..."

"I seem to be... But really..."

"I used to... But now..."

"Question: _____ Answer: _____"

Poets often use repetition to explore a big idea. Enjoy Naomi Shihab's poem "Famous" to get a feel for a repeating theme.

*Association Poem: **Accessing the Creative Brain**

For students who have difficulty getting started, this warm-up is a way to ease in to writing. Encourage students to write without stopping – spill the contents of the brain directly onto the page without judgment. A timer can be handy for this exercise.

Famous

By Naomi Shihab Nye

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is
famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the
cheek.

The idea you carry close to your
bosom
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the
one who carries it
and not at all famous to the one who
is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a
pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did
anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it
could do.

[Access this poem](#) from the Academy of American Poets.

***Hate Love Poem: Perspective, Sensory Language, Imagery**

In her poem "Two Countries," Naomi Shihab Nye imagines skin's vantage point. Encourage your students to explore the viewpoint of an animal, a rock, the sky, truth, or the sole of their shoe. Precise, concrete, and vivid images will be most effective in this prompt. Like the Noise Poem, this can be a fun guessing game: what is the loathed item the writer describes so beautifully? Play with structure freely: this poem makes an excellent sonnet, for example.

Two Countries

by Naomi Shihab Nye

Skin remembers how long the years grow
when skin is not touched, a gray tunnel
of singleness, feather lost from the tail
of a bird, swirling onto a step,
swept away by someone who never saw
it was a feather. Skin ate, walked,
slept by itself, knew how to raise a
see-you-later hand. But skin felt
it was never seen, never known as
a land on the map, nose like a city,
hip like a city, gleaming dome of the mosque
and the hundred corridors of cinnamon and rope.

Skin had hope, that's what skin does.
Heals over the scarred place, makes a road.
Love means you breathe in two countries.
And skin remembers--silk, spiny grass,
deep in the pocket that is skin's secret own.
Even now, when skin is not alone,
it remembers being alone and thanks something larger
that there are travelers, that people go places
larger than themselves.

***My Code:**

Vivid Language, Precision

Habits of speech contribute to the originality of a writer's voice.

Exploring the sources of our own most common turns of phrase can reveal and remind us of stories about ourselves.

Students may find they do not always say what they mean. Can they translate their tropes: can they say what they mean?

After students write their own code poems, they might like to write poems using one another's most common words. Allow partnering based on friendship for the most meaningful results.

This exercise can also be extended as a character development practice for those who write fiction: write your characters' code poems!

Read the poem "Making a Fist" for a phrase that has stuck with poet Naomi Shihab Nye since a childhood journey with her mother.

Making a Fist

By Naomi Shihab Nye

For the first time, on the road north of Tampico,
I felt the life sliding out of me,
a drum in the desert, harder and harder to hear.
I was seven, I lay in the car
watching palm trees swirl a sickening pattern
past the glass.
My stomach was a melon split wide inside my
skin.

"How do you know if you are going to die?"
I begged my mother.
We had been traveling for days.
With strange confidence she answered,
"When you can no longer make a fist."

Years later I smile to think of that journey,
the borders we must cross separately,
stamped with our unanswerable woes.
I who did not die, who am still living,
still lying in the backseat behind all my
questions,
clenching and opening one small hand.

*Mentor Writing: The style of featured author Naomi Shihab Nye

Daily by Naomi Shihab Nye

These shriveled seeds we plant,
corn kernel, dried bean,
poke into loosened soil,
cover over with measured fingertips

These T-shirts we fold into
perfect white squares

These tortillas we slice and fry to crisp strips
This rich egg scrambled in a gray clay bowl

This bed whose covers I straighten
smoothing edges till blue quilt fits brown blanket
and nothing hangs out

This envelope I address
so the name balances like a cloud
in the center of sky

This page I type and retype
This table I dust till the scarred wood shines
This bundle of clothes I wash and hang and wash
again
like flags we share, a country so close
no one needs to name it

The days are nouns: touch them
The hands are churches that worship the world

[Access this poem](#) from the Academy of American Poets.

Now that students are familiar with the work of Naomi Shihab Nye, encourage them to write in her style.

Other poems by Naomi Shihab Nye that make strong models:

- [“The Rider”](#)
- [“Negotiations with a Volcano”](#)
- [“San Antonio”](#)