

House on Fire

We all have difficult times at some point in our lives. Everyone struggles, even though sometimes in the middle of a problem it seems as if we are the only people alive to have such difficulties. This lesson gives you an opportunity to identify a difficult issue in your life and write about it. Writing about problems can help develop creative ways to solve them, or at least produce new ways to think about them.

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GETTING STARTED

To begin, think of three times in your past when you had a problem and solved it. Jot these down in the space below.

Problems or Issues from the Past	
• What was it?	• How was it resolved?
• What was it?	• How was it resolved?
• What was it?	• How was it resolved?

READING

Read “Forgiving Dad” by Erik Gundersen. In this story, the author describes a difficult issue in his life. As you read, look for answers to these questions:

- What is a “house on fire”?
- What is the writer’s “house on fire”?
- Why does he want to write about his “house on fire” now?

Forgiving Dad

By Erik Gundersen

Sandra Cisneros, the writer, says that everyone has a house on fire. “Those things that are so taboo to you, so hidden from view, keep your house burning. Talk about them. Write about them,” she told me and a group of colleagues at a teacher’s conference last year. As I busily scribbled down these words of hers, these pearls of wisdom, I realized that my father was my house on fire. My troubled, angry, crazy, bitter relationship with him simmers, sparks, and sometimes even rages. And, for the most part, I just let it burn. But now, now that he’s working so hard to gain my friendship, I have to decide if I want to forgive him.

When I was seven, my father told me that I was too big to hug him good-night. Ever since, I haven’t really liked him that much. Throughout my early years, Dad was distant and sad, involved in a world of marriage and fatherhood that he wasn’t ready to handle. His affection was so inconsistent and conditional that I knew not to trust him from an early age. I also knew that there were other differences between my dad and my friends’ fathers. For one thing, theirs all seemed to have jobs, while mine didn’t. In first grade, when Miss Cotter asked me what my father did, I sat speechless because I really didn’t know. I felt my eyes fill with fear and shame.

Through my early adolescence, Dad drank a lot and spent money recklessly. And as Dad’s behavior grew more and more unacceptable, my mother, brother, and I worked with increasing energy to shield him from outside scorn. Without ever discussing it, we began to tell carefully crafted stories designed to protect Dad from the questions and concerns of curious family members and friends.

My mother finally kicked Dad out of the house when I was seventeen, a senior in high school. Dad had done too many unspeakable things, worked too little, spent too much, and refused to acknowledge his drinking problem. Mom was tired of Dad’s ways, sick of lying for him, ready for a new start. Or at least she thought she was. During the months Dad was gone, I became my mother’s confidant. She told me everything. When I realized I had seen and heard much more than a seventeen-year-old boy should know, it was too late. I decided never to forgive my father for hurting my mother so deeply and for making my childhood such a crazy mess. Six months after Mom kicked him out, he moved back in. For good.

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Since then, twelve years ago, Dad and I have kept our distance. We've seen each other regularly, but have never really moved beyond pleasant conversation. Over the past year, however, my sometimes funny, ever-entertaining father has been consistently warm and charming. And I find myself both heartened and bewildered in his company, wondering if I might some day share with him the thoughts and feelings I've never been able to.

These days, Dad wants to know who I'm dating, how work is going, what I think of the world around me. I'm on the brink of letting him into my life, but doing so scares me to death. When I hesitate before sharing anything important, I feel like the seven-year-old boy with the elephantine memory and the ice-cold heart, unable to forgive. But when I think about relaxing that resolve I made thirteen years ago and inviting Dad in, I realize that I'm not quite ready. I'm happy that the resolve I made so many years ago is weakening, but I also know that forgiveness takes a long, long time.

THINKING AND TALKING

Work with a partner to answer these questions about "Forgiving Dad."

1. What is a "house on fire"?

2. What is the writer's "house on fire"?

3. Why does he want to write about his "house on fire" now?

4. What question is the writer trying to answer?

5. What do you think the writer should do? Why?

PLANNING

Now think about your own "house on fire." Choose a problem from the past that you are comfortable writing about. Answer these questions to help you plan your writing.

House on Fire Planning Guide

1. What was the problem, and when did it start? How did it start?

2. What was your reaction? Why?

3. Describe a specific event or reaction that demonstrates how difficult this was for you.

4. What did people around you say?

5. What did you say or think?

6. If the problem was resolved, how did it end? If it is still a problem, what are you asking yourself now?

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Writing Prompt: House on Fire—A Struggle from My Past

Write about a time in your past when you struggled over a person or situation. Describe the situation and the people who were involved. Write about how you felt and what you said or did. Write about how the problem was solved or the questions that remain. Use descriptive details, dialogue, specific vocabulary, and interior monologue to re-create for the reader the struggle you experienced.

REVISING AND EDITING

After writing, review this checklist and make necessary changes.

- Did you begin by describing the situation and what led up to the problem?
- Did you include specific details about when, where, and why this took place?
- Did you describe who was there?
- Did you include interior monologue (what you were thinking)?
- Did you write about your feelings?
- Did you show what happened at the end?
- Did you organize the events of your story into paragraphs?
- Check your punctuation. Did you use capital letters, commas, periods, and quotation marks where they belong?
- Did you add a title to give the reader a preview of the incident?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Congratulations on completing this process. How would you score this piece of writing?

- (4) Commendable (3) Proficient (2) Nearly Proficient (1) Developing

Scoring Guide for Lesson 5: House on Fire

GENRE: PERSONAL NARRATION

Five Features in Personal Narrative Writing

- Event: Narrative Description and Elaboration
- Organization of Ideas
- Writer's Voice
- Language: Sentences and Vocabulary
- Mechanics: Spelling and Grammar

4 • COMMENDABLE

- Event or situation is vividly described; includes elaboration through description, use of images, anecdotes, and specific details that enable the reader to experience the event.
- Beginning is engaging and parts of the event are presented in a clever or unusual way.
- Writer is engaged in telling the story for the reader; details are convincing; writer's personality emerges from the writing through interior monologue, dialogue, description of thoughts or feelings, or directly addressing the reader.
- Language is precise and lively. Sentences are varied and vocabulary is specific.
- Writing shows clear control of writing conventions; errors do not cause confusion.

3 • PROFICIENT

- Event is described in some detail though the reader may have questions.
- Narrative has a beginning, middle, and conclusion.
- Writer's personality comes through in writing.
- Language is clear; sentence types are varied; vocabulary is general.
- Writing shows control of writing conventions; errors do not interfere with meaning.

2 • NEARLY PROFICIENT

- Event is described incompletely or writing describes more than one event.
- Description of event moves too fast; middle or conclusion may be abrupt or missing.
- Connection between event and writer may not be clear.
- Language is simple; sentence types are mostly the same; vocabulary is limited.
- Writing does not always show control of conventions; errors may interfere with meaning.

1 • DEVELOPING

- Event is identified but may be vague, incomplete, or a list without examples.
- Organization is not clear; parts of beginning, middle, or end may be missing.
- Writing does not communicate meaning or significance of event for writer.
- Language is general and vague; sentences may be incomplete or run-on.
- Errors may interfere with meaning.