



Teaching Threads

It's in the Bag: Twelve Literacy Activities

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In advising teachers to increase active learning and reduce passive learning, the fundamental question arises, "But what do you do if you don't do worksheets?" This set of activities begins to answer that question. The activities presented are those that can be prepared easily and inexpensively by classroom teachers; can be adapted across grade or skill levels and subject areas, and used from independent to large-group work arrangements; provide unique ways for students to practice previously learned skills; grab student attention; and are lots of fun! This article presents 12 activities that promote active learning of various language arts skills. Each activity begins with a plain brown paper lunch bag.

#1 - There is was! - Creative Storytelling

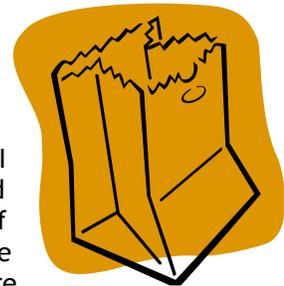
This activity is especially successful after students have studied or experienced storytelling and storytellers. Each student, pair, or group of students is given a brown paper sack and directed not to open it until instructed to do so. Then the teacher presents this story starter on the board: "There it was! I just opened my locker after 2nd period, and there it was." The students are instructed to open their bags to find out what was in their locker and to create a story they will tell to the class. Students can tell their stories informally, or they can write their stories, practice their story telling, prepare costumes or props, and perform their stories for the class. Student storytellers can be video or audio recorded. The following list gives examples of items that can be included in the brown paper bags. The actual item, a photo/drawing of the item, or the name of the item written on an index card can be used.

Suggestions for items to include in paper bags include a/an:

Valentine	Popular toy
Snake	Invitation to a party
CD	Roll of dollar bills
Marijuana cigarette	Lucky charm
Diary	Teacher's grade book
Set of keys	Two ticket to ____

#2 - What's Inside? - More Creative Storytelling

This activity demonstrates one way that Activity 1 can be easily changed, expanded upon, or extended. The basic directions for Activity 1 remain the same with the following changes. The story starter given is, "I was walking home from school looked down to my left and there it was. I was even more amazed when I opened it." All of the items included in the brown paper bags are containers. Examples of containers which can be used in this activity include a/an:



CD case	Gym bag
Envelope	Tiny silver box
Glass vial	Leather pouch
Velvet purse	Grocery sack
Toolbox	Wooden box
Book bag	Lunch box
Wallet	Shoe box

#3 - How-To - Writing Directions

In this activity, each student, pair, or group of students is given a brown paper bag and is asked the question, "How do you make a paper bag?" The students are to work together to write the steps in making a paper bag. Students are encouraged to study their paper bag and disassemble it, if necessary. Completed how-to steps are exchanged so students can test the ideas of their classmates.

#4 - A Bag Full of Possibilities - Identifying Essentials

In 1990 Robert Fulghum (*Newsweek Special Edition on Education, 1990*) presented the idea of a "possibles" bag. As he related, American



frontiersmen always carried a leather bag of what they called their "possibles." These items were essential for survival, such as flint, steel, and tinder to make a fire. Frontiersmen knew that no matter how well they packed for their journeys, sooner or later the supplies would run out, and they would need to rely on their possibles. But often times these men survived even without their possibles because, as Fulghum put it "their real possibles were contained in a skin bag carried just behind their eyeballs" (p. 92). In this activity a student, pair, or group of students is given an empty brown paper bag and is told the story of the possibles bag of American frontiersmen. Students are then instructed to design their own possibles bag. They are to list on the bag those items they would include. The items must be the essential for survival. Ideas include possibles for a/an:

Teenager in 2016	Second grader at recess
Homeless person	Family
Healthy ecosystem	Day at the beach
Satisfying career	Safe neighborhood
Friendship	Interesting book
President of the US	
Wilderness camping trip	
Successful rock or rap group	

#5 - How Many? - Creative Thinking

The idea for this activity was taken from a creative thinking test developed in the 1950's. Each student, pair, or group of students is given a brown paper lunch bag and asked, "How many different uses can you think of for this paper bag?" Encourage students to include all their ideas in this brainstorming activity. Have students share their ideas to compile a class list to be posted in the classroom. Different classrooms in the same school can challenge one another to see who can compile the largest list of uses for a brown paper lunch bag.

#6 - Let's do Lunch! - Making Grocery Lists

Each student, pair, or group of students is given a brown paper lunch bag and this assignment: Plan the perfect sack lunch that you will prepare for your class. Make your grocery list of all the items you'll need with the amounts needed. This activity can be extended to have students locate the price of each item and calculate the cost of their perfect sack lunch. Students can estimate the cost ahead of time and later determine which students came closest to the actual cost. This activity can also be adapted to involve the typical sack lunches of students in other countries or from various time periods in American history.

#7 - It's News to Me! - Creating Newspaper Stories

This activity will be more successful if students have previously studied the components of a newspaper article and have experienced locating the who, what, where, when, and why within actual news stories. In this activity, each student, pair or group of students is given a brown paper bag containing a set of elements from actual news stories. These sets are prepared ahead by finding the who, what, where, when, and why from various newspaper stories. Each is written or taped to



an index card. Included in each bag is a scrambled set of two "who" cards, two "what" cards, two "where" cards, two "when" cards, and two "why" cards. Students are directed to write a fictitious newspaper story using as many of the cards as possible. Completed stories can be typed in a newspaper format with photos or drawings.

#8 - Getting to Know You - Asking and Answering Questions

This activity is especially helpful during the first week of school or when new students join the classroom group. Each student, pair, or group of students is given a brown paper bag containing a set of getting-to-know-you questions, each one written on a separate index card. The questions are selected to uncover fun or interesting information about the students. The students are directed to pick one question card from the bag and then to take turns asking each group member the question on their card. Suggestions for questions include:

- What is your favorite toy? Favorite person? Favorite pizza?
- How would your parents describe you? Your friends? Your teachers?
- What is your most treasured possession?
- Given the choice would you rather bike, swim or skate?
- Do you have any sisters? Brothers? Pets?
- If you were a color, what would you be?
- What are you good at?
- If you could have lunch with anyone at all, whom would you pick?
- What is your favorite music? Place? Teacher?
- What is the funniest/ happiest/ scariest thing that has ever happened to you?
- Who is your hero?
- If you could time travel where would you go?
- What is your favorite movie? Book? Series?
- How would you like to become famous?
- What food do you most dislike?

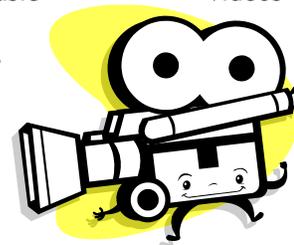
#9 - All About Me! - Oral Presentations

In this activity each student will give a short oral presentation to help classmates get to know one another. The students are given a brown paper lunch bag and instructed that as homework they are to find one or two items that are meaningful to them and will fit inside the bag. Students can use actual objects and/or photos. The following day, students will make a short presentation to the class focused on the objects they brought in their paper bags. These presentations can be in front of the entire class or in smaller groups of students. This activity can be changed to allow students to fill their bags anonymously and have classmates try to determine who brought which object/s.

#10 - Lights, Camera, Action! - Making Music Videos

In this activity students, pairs, or groups of students are asked to design a music video. A song is selected ahead of time to be used in this activity. This can be a currently popular song, a song related to the curriculum, a song from the World War II time period, a classic country or rock song, or even a favorite song from the teacher's younger days! The students listen to and are given the lyrics to the song. They are also given a brown paper bag containing two, three, or four things (or photos of things) they must include in their music video, along with the option of including additional items. Music videos can be written as scripts for producers to follow or drawn or created digitally. Some items that might be used in this activity include a:

farm house, clown, dragon, space ship, jeep, dictionary, hamburger, sunflower, neon sign, hot air balloon, fish bowl, bicycle wheel, pair of chopsticks, athletic shoes, or paint brush.



#11 - Time Travel - Imagining the Future

This activity might be more successful if students have been involved in the study of predictions of future life on Earth. Students will be asked to imagine life on Earth hundreds of years from now. Students, pairs, or groups of students will be given a paper bag containing a common present-day item and asked to imagine what future archeologists might conclude upon discovering this item. Items that might be used in this activity include a:

Potato peeler	Zip lock bag
Piece of chalk	Candle
Pop Tart™	Credit card
Neck tie	Frisbee
Cell phone	Rubber band
CD or DVD	Curling iron



#12 - Fishbowl - Reviewing Words and Terms

To prepare for this activity, at least once a week the teacher identifies the vocabulary words and important terms presented in that week's lessons. These words should include terms from all areas of the curriculum. Names of individuals studied in history, current events, or literature can also be included. The teacher writes these words/terms on slips of paper. When a significant collection is created, four to eight terms are randomly put into each paper bag. Students, pairs, or groups of students are given a bag with the direction to create a story or paragraph using all the words. The students must present their stories/paragraphs to the class with all group members actively involved. This activity is a fun way to continually review previously learned vocabulary and concepts throughout the entire school year.

As always, my intent in presenting these activities is to help teachers answer this question -

What can I do to make it easier for my students to learn and behave?



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