

To Say the Name Is to Begin the Story

“**T**o say the name is to begin the story,” according to the Swampy Cree Indians. In my English courses we begin our “story” together by saying our names — and by telling the history of how we came to have them. Because the first day of class lays a foundation for the nine months that follow, I want our year to begin with respect for the diverse cultural heritages and people represented not only at Jefferson High School, but in the world.

Initially, I started the year with writing about our names because I was appalled that several weeks into the new school year, students still would not know each other’s names. Telling about our names was my way of saying up front that the members of the class are part of the curriculum — their names, their stories, their histories, their lives count. But I realized a few years ago that I was missing an opportunity to frame the question of naming more broadly. So this naming ritual has also become a way to say from the jump that naming is personal, cultural, and political. In this case, to say the name is also to begin questioning whose story is told.

I start class by asking students the name of the river connecting Oregon and Washington. When they say, “Columbia,” I tell them that the first people here called it “Che Wana” — Big River. I ask them to name the volcano that blew ash on Washington and Oregon in 1980; when they respond, “Mount St. Helens,” I tell them that the Cowlitz who lived here first named it “Loo-Wit.” Then we talk about how people who have the power to name also have

the power to tell the story. I explain that in this class we will listen for whose voices get heard and whose have been silenced.

Students and I talk about how naming traditions differ depending on family, cultural group, nationality, or religious affiliation. We look at some of the naming traditions in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Mexico. I give examples from my family, where the first son was named using the first initial and the middle name of the father. My grandfather was William Meyer, my father was Walter Meyer, and my brother was William Meyer. My brother broke the

tradition by naming his first son Steven Troy. I broke tradition by not taking my husband’s name — and my mother and sister still addressed their letters to Linda Hereford, not Linda Christensen, ten years after my divorce.

We also speak — using student knowledge as well as mine — of how historically some groups of people were denied their names. Many people from Eastern Europe had their names shortened at Ellis Island because their last names were too long and too difficult for the officials to pronounce. When Africans were

stolen from their homeland, their names and their history were stripped as well. I share the following story that my friend, Bakari Chavanu, wrote about changing his name:

I changed my name to Bakari Chavanu six years ago and my mom still won’t pronounce it. The mail she sends me is still addressed to Johnnie McCowan. I was named after my father. When I

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brought up the subject with her of changing my name, she said my father would turn over in his grave, and “besides,” she said, “how could you be my son if you changed your name?”

I knew she was responding emotionally to what I decided to do. I knew and respected also that she was, of course, the giver of my life and my first identity, but how do I make her understand the larger picture? That the lives of people are more than their families and their birth names, that my identity was taken from me, from her, from my father, from my sister, from countless generations of my people enslaved for the benefit of others? How do I make her understand what it means for a kidnapped people to reclaim their identity? How do I help her understand the need for people of African descent to reclaim themselves?

In addition to Bakari’s moving piece, I use an assortment of prompts to get students started writing. I’ve stumbled across name poems or stories over the years that I read to students as a way of priming the writing pump. One of my favorites is Marge Piercy’s “If I had been called Sabrina or Ann, she said” (1985). Piercy fools around with her name — makes fun of

it in a playful way. Because my name is Linda Mae, I could identify with Piercy’s dismal view of her name. I wanted a name like Cassandra, something fancy and long. My name sounded like a farm girl’s and I wanted to be sleek and citified. I also love Sandra Cisneros’ “My Name” from her book *The House on Mango Street* (1991). Cisneros’ character, Esperanza, uses delicious details to describe her name, “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.”

Teaching Strategy:

I like to begin this activity with a combination of story and poem, humor and seriousness, so students can choose their own route to the assignment.

1. Students read Chavanu’s story, Piercy’s poem and Cisneros’ piece about names. We discuss how differently each writer views his or her name. We pause to look at lines and point out specific details. For example, Piercy doesn’t say she hates her name, she plays with it. “Name/

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like an oilcan, like a bedroom/ slipper, like a
box of baking soda,/ useful, plain”

2. We read student samples from previous years. I find it helpful to save these from year to year as students often look up to their older schoolmates and find it amusing and powerful to see examples of their writing. The following poem written by my student Mary Blalock is a great example of how students can mix personal history, songs, even religion into their poems:

Mary

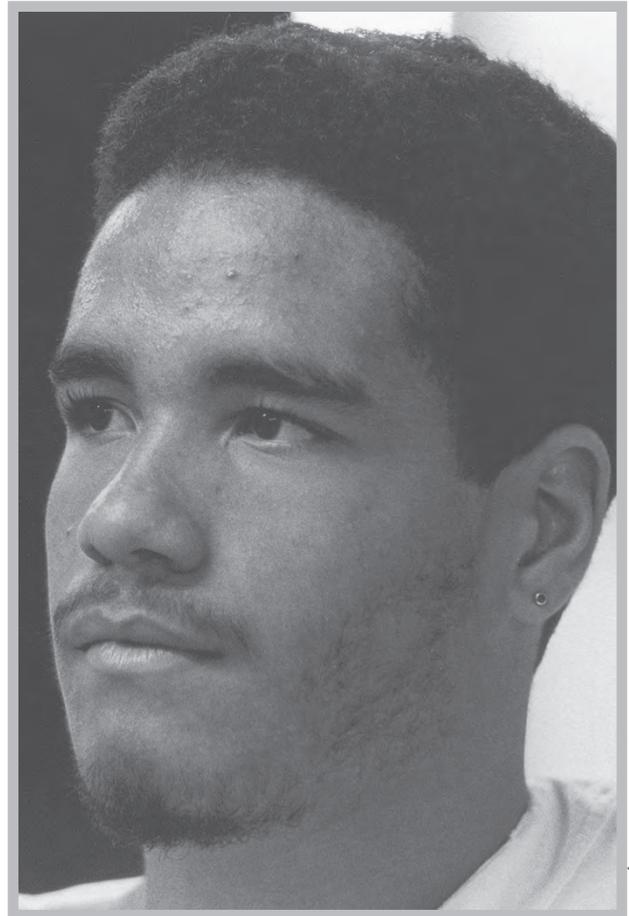
*Mary was a hand-me-down
from Grandma.
I was
the “Little Mary”
on holiday packages.
Merry Christmas.*

*Mary, mother of God,
who is a strong woman
in a male dominated religion.
Me,
a lone girl,
in a world of testosterone.
Because of her,
it means sorrow and grief —
I am very sad about this.*

*“How does your garden grow?” they often ask.
With colorful fruit like the pictures
I attempt to paint,
and beautiful flowers like the poems
I try to write.*

*They had
three little kids in a row,
and the middle one’s me.*

Mary, Mary, not always contrary.



Jean-Claude Lejeune

Another student, Sekou Crawford, wrote his “name poem” as a story about how his mother came to name him Sekou. Because it has dialogue and setting, it is a good model of how the assignment can be written as prose:

I have a very unusual name. Not as unusual as I used to think because just last year I came face to face with another Sekou. He didn’t look much like me, and we probably had very little in common, but when I stood in front of him and shook his hand, I felt we had some kind of secret bond. I could tell he felt the same way.

One day I asked my mom about my name, “How did you come to name me Sekou?”

“Well,” she said, “I used to work with convicts, tutoring them, and one day as I walked across the prison courtyard, I heard someone yell, ‘Hey, Sekou!’ I thought to myself, ‘Wow. What great name.’ And I remembered it.”

I didn’t know how I felt being named after some inmate, but I’ve always been thankful for having it. I couldn’t imagine hearing my name and wondering if they were talking to me or the other guy with the same name. I wouldn’t like walking into a little gift shop and seeing my name carved onto

a key chain. I've heard that somewhere in Northern Africa my name is quite common.

My name has a special meaning. Sekou Shaka, my first and middle name, together mean learned warrior. That's the way I'd like to see myself: Fighting the battle of life with the weapon of knowledge.

Sam Austin wrote his piece after soaking in the flavor of Sandra Cisneros' description:

My name is an all encompassing, fully endowed, drenched and soaked, burnt and charred entity, glazed over with a dark molasses finish. And then given a strong strawberry smoke. It's a sweet song that every time you hear it sounds better than the last.

If spoken correctly, it can get you the sweetest of love or the harshest of hate. Sam to Sammy to Samuel. I've heard those plus some. A man from the streets once told me it's not what you do, but how good you look doing it. And he's halfway right. If you flip my name just right, it gives the feel of an old 1930s gangster Dillinger, or a modern day Casanova. It's the way the girl down the street tosses in that extra long am into my name. "Hey Saaaaam." Or the way that pretty girl with her sensual accent throws that low and long aaah into my name.

I'll go out of my way just to walk by and get that low and steamy, "Hi Saam," from her window. My name really doesn't get any better than that.

3. After saturating students in name poems and prose, I ask students to write about their name. They can write their piece as a story or as a poem. They can tell the history of their name, the meaning of their name, memories or anecdotes connected to their names. They can choose to write about their feelings about their names or their nicknames. The only boundary on the assignment is that they write something about their name.
4. We start writing in class before the period ends, but I encourage students to talk with their parents — if they live with them — to find out the history behind their names. Their homework is to finish the writing and bring their piece to class the following day. We share our work using the read-around method (see the detailed description of read-arounds which begins on page 14).



Susan Lima Ruggles

While no assignment creates instant classroom camaraderie, this exercise does provide a forum for students to share their names and their histories with their classmates. From such a humble beginning, respect can grow. ■

References

- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1991, pp. 10-11.
- Piercy, Marge. "If I Had Been Called Sabrina or Ann, She Said," in *From My Mother's Body*. New York: Knopf, 1985, p. 122.