

LOOKING TO WRITE GRADES 7–12

Writing About People + Places Inspired by Smells



Image: Gordon Parks (American, 1912-2006), *Dock Stevedores Packing and Icing Fish at Fulton Fish Market*, 1943. Gelatin silver print. SBMA, Gift of David Shaw, 1997.100.24. © Gordon Parks Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

In this black-and-white photograph by Gordon Parks, taken in 1943, four men work collaboratively packing and icing fish. Their worn, rough clothing lets us know this is hard and dirty work—heavy, with loads to crate and ship—and always the smell of fish. The four men are solid, like a square. The two in the foreground bend and squat, hammering nails into crates. One faces us, the other turns away. Behind them another pair lowers a metal scoop full of fish. A breeze lifts the tar-like scent off the dock. It mixes in the air with the acrid odor of sweat. The new wood of the crates is a counterpoint: fresh, a leavening smell of land, not sea. We think of sawdust, new buildings. In the center of the crates are the fish—briny, sharp, oily, iodine. A smell that is ocean deep.

ACTIVITY: WRITING WHAT YOU SMELL

Just as this photograph conjures up smells, so too do smells create images in our mind. Scent and memory are linked. Rounding the corner in our neighborhood, we might catch the scent of charcoal, lighter fluid, sizzling fat—prompting a dozen summer barbecues to come to mind. Chimney smoke, pine needles, car exhaust, jasmine, coffee beans, freshly mown grass, garbage...these are some of the smells that accompany walks near and far.

What is the smell that, for you, is so uniquely specific that you wish you had one perfect word to describe it? What does it smell like where you are right now? In either a short descriptive essay or poem, take us on a walk around your home or neighborhood using scent as the trail marker. OR describe a person you love, perhaps miss, with the scents you associate them with.

INSPIRATION TO GET YOU STARTED

Below are some descriptions by writers from around the world and across time, of places and people filtered through memory and scent:

“Our foyer has a funny smell that doesn't smell like anyplace else. I don't know what the hell it is. It isn't cauliflower and it isn't perfume—I don't know what the hell it is—but you always know you're home.”

—J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love.”

—Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

“Louisiana in September was like an obscene phone call from nature. The air—moist, sultry, secretive, and far from fresh—felt as if it were being exhaled into one's face. Sometimes it even sounded like heavy breathing. Honeysuckle, swamp flowers, magnolia, and the mystery smell of the river scented the atmosphere, amplifying the intrusion of organic sleaze. It was aphrodisiac and repressive, soft and violent at the same time. In New Orleans, in the French Quarter, miles from the barking lungs of alligators, the air maintained this quality of breath, although here it acquired a tinge of metallic halitosis, due to fumes expelled by tourist buses, trucks delivering Dixie beer, and, on Decatur Street, a mass-transit motor coach named Desire.” —Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*

“But my mother's hair, my mother's hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pin curls all day, sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring, the rain, and Mama's hair that smells like bread.”

—Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*