

The Zoo Stories: Imagining Animals at Night

Is your child a budding writer? Or does he hit a wall when starting a writing assignment? In both cases, the best way to develop writing skills is by engaging something every child has: imagination. Here's a fun exercise that turns a Saturday trip to the local zoo into an all-out writing frenzy.

What You Need:

- Small notebook
- Pen
- Colored pencils
- Map of the zoo

What You Do:

1. Ever wonder what happens in the zoo at night? What those exotic beasts do when no humans are watching them? Pitch this story idea to your child and watch his eyes light up. Encourage him to write as wild, crazy, or funny a story as he likes. It can be science fiction (tigers that are spies from Mars?), fantasy, adventure, or even a realistic story written from the animal's point-of-view. It can be a short story or a series, a play, or even a newspaper article. Anything goes, really: what matters most is that his imagination, and writing skills, are engaged.
2. Now that he has his story idea, it's time to do a little research at the zoo. Once there, try to slow your child down. Ask him to observe the zoo environment using as many senses and descriptive words as possible, and encourage him to write these observations down. If he likes, he can even accompany his observations by drawing sketches with the colored pencils. Prompt his creativity with questions such as:
 - What's your favorite animal?
 - Could this be the main character of your story?
 - What are some of the animal's most interesting characteristics or behaviors?
 - What details can you observe about the animal's environment?
 - What do you think the animal is feeling or thinking about?
 - What are some other animals you might work into your story?
 - What can you observe about them and their environment?
 - How do you think these animals would get along if there were no cages separating them?
 - What kinds of people do the animals make you think of? (Example: a penguin looks like a man in a tuxedo, a peacock looks like a colorful princess)
3. After your child has enough food for thought, it's time to head home and start writing. Encourage him not to think about structure at first. Instead give him 30 minutes to "power write", or just write without worry of how it will all come together.
4. Afterward, ask him to read the draft aloud to you. Help him select what he thinks are the best parts. Then, guide him through working up a beginning, middle, and end. Chances are these in-depth, free-form stories will be fun, zany and full of insightful observations.



Using your child's natural curiosity and vivid imagination is a great way to get pen to paper. And you've spent the whole afternoon learning about animals without once switching the television to Animal Planet!