

* SPARK

A List of Golden Details

GRADES 7–9

TYPE
NARRATIVE
POETRY

Students will collectively create a running list of golden details—details and descriptions that are singular, completely original, and make one’s subject unforgettable.

WHAT YOUR STUDENTS WILL LEARN

In this activity, students will collectively create a running list of golden details—details and descriptions that are singular, completely original, and make one’s subject unforgettable.

The resulting lists are great fodder for discussion of the varied and meaningful ways a subject can be described.

WHAT YOU WILL DO

Take 25 sheets of blank paper, or one for every student in the class. At the top of each—leaving plenty of room below—write something that might need description: the smell of a grandparent; the sensation of a first kiss; the atmosphere of a funeral home; the taste of a perfect apple; the look in the eyes of someone who’s just seen a car accident. Now, pass these out, one page per student. The task is to come up with the best description or analogy for each prompt.

It works like this: Student A might start with the “smell of a grandparent” sheet. Student A then spends a few minutes

trying to come up with the best description he can think of. When Student A has written something down, he passes the paper on to Student B, and Student A receives another one that's been passed by Student C. The next paper Student A gets might be "the taste of a perfect apple." Student A then spends a few minutes on that one. If he comes up with something, then great. If he doesn't, he can pass it on. Each student writes his or her own analogy below the rest of the descriptions. The final object is to come up with the best description for each prompt.

We usually give the students 25 minutes, so those 25 minutes are pretty madcap, with the papers flying, the students searching for the prompts that inspire them. At the end of the 25 minutes, each prompt might have 10–15 descriptions written below it. The teacher then reads all the descriptions aloud, and the students vote on which one is best. Whichever student wins the most prompts is feted in some appropriate way.

This activity is easily repeated over multiple sessions. If you are repeating this activity, challenge students to write the original "something that might need a description" before they pass the paper to the next person.