

## AP® Language and Composition

### Writing Scenes Using *Humans of New York*

Lauren Peterson

**Lesson Overview:** This lesson invites students to explore how effective storytelling can distill powerful emotions and experiences into brief, memorable scenes. Drawing inspiration from Brandon Stanton's *Humans of New York (HONY)*, students will analyze real narratives to understand how writers use figurative language, vivid details, and dialogue to convey meaning—and how these strategies can be used in memoir/personal writing.

### Big Ideas

- Powerful stories are built on specific moments, not general summaries.
- Writers use narrative techniques (imagery, tone, figurative language, dialogue, pacing) to make scenes come alive.
- Personal stories can reflect broader human themes such as resilience, grief, identity, love, and connection.
- Analyzing micro-stories like *HONY* helps writers make purposeful choices in their own storytelling.

### Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify and analyze narrative strategies in short personal stories.
- Evaluate how writers capture emotion and meaning through scene-based storytelling.
- Apply figurative language, vivid detail, and purposeful structure in their own memoir scenes.
- Reflect on how specific moments from real people's lives can inform their own writing.

### Before the Lesson

- [Download the slideshow](#)
- [Review the \*Humans of New York\* website](#)
- Upload the slideshow to your learning platform (Google Classroom, Canvas, etc.)
- Bookmark or project examples of *Humans of New York* for visual reference
- Review or plan a mini-lesson on: Narrative writing vs. summary, the role of specific scenes in storytelling, and/or literary devices to look for (imagery, dialogue, tone, etc.)
- Prepare anchor charts, slides, or quick reviews of figurative language terms and dialogue formatting rules (if students will use this later in writing).
- Optional: Create a graphic organizer or worksheet version for students to record their answers (digital or print)

**1. Set the Purpose**

- Introduce the lesson by saying something like: *“Today we’re diving into storytelling—not the long, drawn-out kind, but powerful moments that capture emotion, connection, and meaning in just a few lines or images. These are the kinds of moments you’ll craft in your own memoir scenes soon.”*

**2. Introduce *Humans of New York***

- Briefly explain Brandon Stanton's *HONY* project (1-2 minutes)
- Show a few compelling *HONY* examples if needed
- Emphasize how short stories can communicate big emotions or ideas

**3. Review Literary Devices to Look For**

- Remind students of key narrative strategies:
  - Imagery
  - Figurative language
  - Dialogue
  - Tone/emotion
  - Human connection/theme

**4. Explain the Task**

- Students will:
  - Read and analyze stories from the slideshow
  - Answer the guiding questions for each story (If a question doesn't apply, they may skip it—but should briefly note why.)
  - Complete the reflection slide at the end of the deck after all assigned stories are analyzed
- Note: There are several stories so that this can be jigsawed or completed in small groups.

**5. Model One “Scene” or “Story” Together**

- Walk through a sample story and think aloud
  - Highlight a specific language
  - Identify tone or emotional impact
  - Connect to a broader human theme

**6. Independent or Partner Work**

- Let students begin reading and analyzing the stories
- Encourage them to pace themselves and choose stories that resonate with them
- Circulate to support students, answer questions, or prompt deeper analysis

## 7. Debrief as a Class or in Small Groups

- Invite a few volunteers to share:
  - A story that stood out and why
  - A theme or emotion they saw across multiple stories
  - A technique they want to try in their own writing

## 8. Guide the Final Reflection

- Ensure students complete the reflection slide: What did you learn about storytelling from this activity? What techniques might you use in your own memoir scene?
- Optional: Use this as an exit ticket

## 9. Review Student Work

- Look for:
  - Depth of analysis
  - Use of literary vocabulary
  - Engagement with the emotional or human aspects of the stories

## 10. Prepare for the Next Lesson

- Use this analysis as a launchpad for:
  - Writing a personal memoir scene
  - Mini-lessons on dialogue, figurative language, or pacing
  - Storytelling circles or peer workshops

## Teacher Tips

- Allow choice in which stories students analyze—it builds engagement.
- Emphasize quality of analysis over quantity of words.
- Keep reminding students: *“Memoir is about the moment, not the summary.”*

## Ideas for Differentiation

- Identify students who may need:
  - Fewer stories to analyze (e.g., 5 instead of 8)
  - Sentence starters or model analysis
  - Audio versions of the stories (optional)
- Prepare extension options for fast finishers:
  - Drafting their own *HONY*-style scene
  - Writing a reflection comparing two different stories