

## **VIDEO**

# Write With... Life Stories: Breaking the Rules with Viet Thanh Nguyen

by 826 National and Life Stories

GRADES 9-12

### **TYPE**

FANTASY/SCIFI
INFORMATIONAL
MEMOIR
NARRATIVE
PERSUASIVE
POETRY
PLAYWRITING

Have some fun and break the rules—the writing rules, that is. In this lesson, you will examine genre conventions and create a piece of writing that breaks or blends rules, making it uniquely your own.

# WHAT YOUR STUDENTS WILL LEARN

# **About Life Stories**

Life Stories is a 501(c)(3) non-profit media organization that creates and distributes documentaries, interviews, and educational resources about people whose lives inspire meaningful change. These stories address issues of civics, history, politics, the arts and culture by shining the spotlight on relatable human stories of purpose and meaning in times of change. They provide open access to all our content for communities and classrooms through our curated website and YouTube channel.

### About The Thread

The Thread is a documentary interview series exploring what it means to live a purpose-driven life through conversations with multi-faceted people who have helped shape our society. Each 30-minute episode takes viewers on a personal journey into the life of extraordinary people who candidly share their triumphs and failures. The Thread is available on the Life Stories website and YouTube channel, and as a podcast across all major platforms. Teaching The Thread brings the series into

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the classroom with episode lessons designed to strengthen social emotional learning and media literacy skills and expand the scope of subject matter in Social Studies and English Language Arts.

# WHAT YOU WILL DO

# **Before You Begin**

## **Content Note:**

- In this video, Viet Thanh Nguyen shares memories of growing up as a refugee during the Vietnam War, as well as acts of racism he experienced. It is important to recognize that these topics might be challenging for some students and to adjust the lesson accordingly.
- We suggest you screen the video beforehand for topics that might need more historical or cultural context to help students access the full meaning of the speaker's story. The lesson provided by Life Stories offers discussion questions to help your students dig deeper.

### **Editor's Note:**

- This lesson aligns with the following CASEL Standards:
  - Responsible Decision-Making
  - Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness

### Introduction

Viet Thanh Nguyen arrived in America as a four-year-old refugee after the 1975 fall of Saigon and has gone on to become one of our nation's most distinguished novelists and academics. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his first novel, *The Sympathizer*, Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen honors us with a

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candidly personal interview on this unique and timely episode of *The Thread*. To see the full lesson created by Life Stories, please visit: Viet Thanh Nguyen: America Through My Eyes.

Inspired by Viet Thanh Nguyen's interview, in this lesson, you will break writing rules and think about how creativity and a reader's expectations work together.

### STEP 1

To begin, watch the clip of Viet Thanh Ngyuen's *The Thread* video: 9:37-12:13. Then, freewrite your answer to this question in your writing journal: **Do you think creativity can exist with boundaries** and rules? Why or why not?

### STEP 2

In the clip you just watched, Viet Thanh Nguyen talks about playing with his writing and breaking the rules of standard conventions. "Why not?" he says. "Why can't I make my prose look like poetry? What are these definitions?" These questions serve as inspiration for your writing today!

Next, find pages 1 and 2 of the <u>Breaking the Rules with Viet Thanh Nguyen— Handout</u>. You'll notice the word "poetry" in the center of page 1 and the word "prose" in the center of page 2. On each page, write what you already know about each genre:

- For poetry, consider technical elements such as form, rhyme scheme, themes and topics, etc.
- For prose, consider form, character tropes, plot formulas, common conflicts, etc.

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• For both, feel free to share your personal opinions, too. If you think writing or reading poetry is incredibly boring, share that! This may create an excellent starting point for the activity in this lesson.

### STEP 3

What you just wrote about were the basic *genre conventions* for poetry and prose. Genre conventions are the technical elements that readers expect when they pick up a book. If you've ever read a book (or watched a TV show or movie) and have been able to accurately predict what happens at every turn, that's because you are familiar with the conventions of that genre!

• Genre conventions: the technical elements that readers expect when they read (or watch) something.

For example, poetry is often written in stanzas; whereas prose is usually written in paragraphs. Poetry is usually known for using sentence fragments and rhyme schemes to create a musical tone. Prose is generally written in full sentences, but those full sentences show the reader the action so that they have a full picture of the scene. They both utilize sensory language to help the reader feel immersed in the world that's being built.

These are fairly well-known conventions, but they do not encompass every type of poem or every type of prose. Often, the most exciting pieces of writing find a way to break or blend those rules in some way!

### STEP 4

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Which brings us to the fun part: breaking the rules. Go back to pages 1 and 2 of the handout and examine the conventions and opinions you shared. Think about how you could blend or break the rules to create a unique piece of writing. For example, if you wrote that you think poetry is boring, what could you do to make it more interesting? This is a time to experiment and play with your writing, without worrying about "getting it right." Who knows—you may stumble across an incredible combination!

If you need help getting started, try one of the prompts below:

- \* Create a new character that breaks its most common convention. Protagonists in genre fiction—like mystery, romance, and thriller—almost always have the same set of characteristics. But, what would those stories be if the main character had other strengths? (For example, what kind of detective would Sherlock Holmes be if he wasn't so shrewdly observant?) Use the <a href="Character-O-Matic: Protagonist">Character-O-Matic: Protagonist</a> handout to help you develop a character that defies tropes! After you've developed a character, try writing a scene that's typical for that genre, featuring your atypical hero.
- Write an anti-ode. Odes are usually lyrical, celebratory poems. In an anti-ode, you're writing about something you hate! Instead of using beautiful, lyrical language that celebrates a person or a thing, why not try using language that is very straightforward and lacking in imagery? For example, if you hate poetry, you could write an anti-ode about poetry. An example of an anti-ode can be read here.
- Write a short personal essay in the form of a recipe. Think of a memorable moment from your life and break it down into individual components—ingredients, if you will. Study online recipes or cookbooks that might be around your home to learn more about the structure of recipes. Use cooking vocabulary and measurements to tell your story.

### STEP 5

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Finally, reflect on the process of breaking writing rules. In your writing journal, answer these questions:

- 1. How did it feel to break genre conventions and play with your writing?
- <sup>2.</sup> Did you learn something about writing poetry or prose by breaking the rules?
- 3. Do you see yourself doing this more in your writing?

# **MATERIALS**

- Viet Thanh Nguyen: The Vietnam War Refugee Experience Behind The Sympathizer The Thread video
- Breaking the Rules with Viet Thanh Nguyen— Handout
  - 1 copy per student
- Writing journal or a blank piece of paper
- Writing utensil

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