



## Creative Writing: Folklore & Folktales

**folklore:** the tales, beliefs, customs, or other traditions of a people, handed down from generation to generation

**folktale:** a story that is part of the folklore of a people and often appears in different versions

### **ie: Joe Magarac**

The story of Joe Magarac is well-known throughout western Pennsylvania and the surrounding regions. Unlike most folk stories, which come from an oral tradition, Joe Magarac probably began as a written work of fiction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But, it became a favorite of storytellers in ethnic communities in southwestern Pennsylvania during the heyday of steel manufacturing. As it was passed down through the years, the story evolved into many versions.

See how many different versions of the story you can find. Choose a version that interests you and write a short summary of the story of Joe Magarac.

Compare and contrast different versions of the story, especially with relation to the ethnic background of the characters. Explain how the different versions use the ethnic traditions to develop the plots of the stories.

Find an ethnic connection to the story of Joe Magarac. Discover the motivation and influence of the ethnic origin, and why that ethnicity was important to the story.

Create a picture book of the story of Joe Magarac. Use your story summary to write your book. Illustrate the book with your own drawings of Joe Magarac and the other characters in the story.

Create a comic strip of the story of Joe Magarac. Summarize the story with comic strip blocks and illustrations.

Revise the story of Joe Magarac by changing the ethnicity of the main character. What are the most important changes that happen in the story as a result of a different ethnic background for the main character?

Interview a family member, relative, neighbor, or family friend. Find out if there is a character and/or story that has been passed down through that person's oral traditions. Summarize the story and explain the heritage that was important to the story.

Using what you have learned about a particular ethnic background and heritage, write a folktale. Create a character and a situation that demonstrates the values and beliefs that were shared by immigrants of that nationality. Illustrate your story, using appropriate drawings and colors.



Try to find examples of other stories that may be true folktales, brought here by immigrants and shared through the generations. There are many possibilities, including the following two suggestions:

(1) Maxo Vanko was an iconographer who painted the murals at St. Nicholas Church in Millvale. Late one evening, while he painted in the church, Maxo made sketches of a ghost that he saw;

(2) Julia Warhola, Andy Warhol's mother, tells a story which originated in the Carpathian Mountains. It was adapted to pertain to McKeesport, and it is the story of a philanthropist hobo.

Use references in books, or interviews with people in communities, to find out about supernatural sightings and/or activities. There are many stories about ghosts, witches, devils, and other supernatural beings that have evolved into folktales. They often teach lessons, explain unusual situations, or have other purposes (ie: to "scare" teenagers into proper behavior). Find out about the characters and stories, and explain why they may have evolved and become commonly-told stories.



## Creative Writing: Letters

There are five parts to a letter. The five parts include:

**HEADING** --- street address  
city, state zip code  
month day, year

Dear (name), --- **GREETING**  
paragraphs filled with information --- **BODY**  
**CLOSING** --- Your friend,  
**SIGNATURE** --- Your name

Choose two people or an important situation and write a letter. Decide who will write the letter, and decide to whom the letter will be sent. Include details and facts in the body of the letter. Some possible letters could be:

\* an immigrant as he/she travels from the home country to the new land, America; choose the time period, and refer to the problems being faced by the immigrant that pertain to that time period;

\* an immigrant, after he/she has landed at Ellis Island; or after he/she has arrived at the international airport and faces customs and immigration procedures;

\* an immigrant, after he/she has settled into a new job – a job that is not one which uses the skills and training the immigrant received prior to leaving home (ie: a doctor who cannot practice medicine here; a musician who has to work in a textile mill instead of playing in an orchestra);

\* an immigrant steel mill worker to his parents in his home country to describe his work in the steel mill; or an unskilled laborer who worked in a factory in his home country, but who faces the lack of factory work here;

\* a young woman who has come to America as a bride – a situation that was arranged by the bride's family and the groom's family; or a young woman who has answered an advertisement (online or in a magazine) and has arrived for an arranged marriage;

\* a young student who has learned a new language, and has started to make new friends – especially friends that he/she would not have been allowed to have in the home country;

\* an immigrant trying to preserve his ethnic traditions and customs in today's modern society;



- \* a student to an ancestor in the “old country” to ask about the ethnic traditions and customs as they would be practiced there;

- \* a child to a cousin who has settled in another part of the United States; explaining reasons to move to southwestern Pennsylvania;

- \* contacting a relative left behind during a migration (ie: a former slave who has left the south to find freedom in the north; an unemployed southerner who came north to work in the steel mills); explaining the job situation and the difficulties faced;

- \* information to relatives in the “old country” to reassure them that this was a good move; explaining why you chose to settle in southwestern Pennsylvania, as opposed to another region in the United States;

- \* any other situation you think would be interesting – just be sure that you include accurate facts and details in the body of your letter;

- \* a letter from you, the student, to a current ethnic organization in southwestern Pennsylvania; request information about the organization’s goals, mission, and purpose, and the types of activities and events that it sponsors; this letter could then be sent to the organization, and the information that is received could be shared with the class.



## Creative Writing: Speeches

Choose a topic to research and write about. Try to find something that is controversial or innovative. Write a short speech about the topic, including important details and accurate facts. Your speech should be 2-5 minutes long. After you have written your speech, practice it. Then, give your speech in front of your class. Be prepared to answer your classmates' questions about the situation and the people involved.

Some possible topics for a speech could be:

- \* defending a particular religious belief and/or practice to those of a different religion; choosing a time period that might contribute to the particular problems, and explaining how the time period was a major factor in the problems that are/were faced;

- \* the difficulties with the beginning of the union system on the mill workers and the problems faced by immigrant workers who wanted to join the union; problems that continue to be faced today, especially ones that are a result of a worker's ethnicity;

- \* problems encountered by immigrants who wanted to find housing in an area, but were not allowed to live in a particular place; problems that may still be faced by people of particular ethnic backgrounds in their search for housing;

- \* the difficulties faced by people who could not speak the language, especially in an emergency situation (ie; a medical crisis or a legal problem); solutions that are being offered (ie: special teachers and classes in public schools, evening tutoring for adults);

- \* problems faced by students who must attend schools in which they didn't understand the language, and therefore were placed in very low grades (ie: teenagers in first grade); problems that students face today, and explanations of the possible solutions;

- \* explanation of the situations faced by an immigrant family moving to southwestern Pennsylvania; choose a particular time period and focus on the particular problems faced when trying to preserve their customs, traditions, language, foods, music, dances, or anything else;

- \* problems and difficulties faced by immigrants who dress differently, and therefore have obvious cultural differences; compare the problems faced in past time periods with the difficulties faced in present-day society;

- \* problems faced by people who have to give up the music, dance, craftwork, or art they have learned in their home country; explanation of the difficulties faced as a result of time constraints or lack of resources (materials, supplies);

- \* controversy faced by women who entered the work force, at a time when it was needed (ie: World War II or the 1980s) but not necessarily approved by society;



explanation of the types of jobs previously held by men, but taken by women at a particular time and for particular reasons;

\* any other topic you feel would be of interest to others, especially one that is controversial and leads to discussion, disagreement, and exchange of information.