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ABSTRACT

This sixteenth volume of "Notes Plus: A Quarterly of Practical Teaching Ideas" contains numerous teaching ideas from English classrooms. Articles in number 1 are: "'Cricket' Contests as Class Exercises" (Rosemary Laughlin); "Body Biography Revisited" (Julie Medow); "Helping Students Keep in Touch" (Joyce Taaffe); "A Love Affair with Letter Writing" (Margaret Oberender); "Using Color in Writing Revision" (Dawnelle Hyland); and "A 'Real World' Peer Edit Session" (Katherine Early). It also offers excerpts from NCTE-talk (an electronic discussion group) on teaching poetry. Articles in number 2 offer ideas that cross traditional boundaries between disciplines and are: "Exploring Point of View through Photographs" (Aimee V. Nichols); "Voices from the Civil War: Collages That Capture Attitudes toward War" (Sarah Powley); "Student Anthropologists Explore Science Fiction" (Karen Ballash); "Understanding Revision through Music" (William Ebbesen); "The One-Question Interview" (Debby Drong-Bjork); "Maximum Writing, Minimum Frustration" (Raphael Jostoneaux, Jr.); "Mood Music" (Cathy Schluessher); "The Reduction: An Organizational Tool That Aids Critical Thinking" (Mary Jane Reed); "Rendering a Text" (Bunny Mogilnicki); "Reflection Journals" (Barbara Lutkenhaus); "Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback" (Bruce Cray); "Waterfall of Words" (Beverly J. Jackson); "Their Own Voices, Their Own Choices" (Stephen Fisher); and "In Search of Ordinary Heroes: A Project Inspired by Miep Gies" (Rose Reissman). Ideas in number 3 are: "Reading the News as a Responsible Citizen" (Rose Reissman); "Learning More about People We Know" (Mara Malone); "A Winning 'Introduce Yourself' Writing Activity" (Terry Martin); "Writing a Personal School Resume" (Kim Ballard); "Annotated Sample Outline for Student's Resume"; "Fairy Tales and the Language of Fiction" (Carol Deurloo); "Connecting with Veterans on Veterans Day" (Jerry Ellsworth); and "'Our Class' Assists with 'Our Town'" (Kristen M. Burgess). Ideas in the number 4 issue are: "'Photo Poems' and Descriptive Narratives" (Dave Harvey); "Writing

around the Clock" (Christine Burt); "A Testimonial for the I-Wish Poem" (B. Joyce Stallworth); "The Postcard Short Story" (Ellen Zaki); "Writing 'Great Beginnings'" (Daphne Nelson); "Turn on Your Computers and Turn On Your Students" (Jeffrey N. Golub); and "Reflecting on Repercussions" (Doris Brewton). (RS)

Notes Plus: A Quarterly of Practical Teaching Ideas.
Volume 16.

NOTES Plus

A Quarterly of Practical Teaching Ideas August 1998

In This Issue

Ideas from the Classroom

New Ideas and a New Schedule

Welcome to a new publication year of *NOTES Plus,* NCTE's newsletter of practical teaching ideas for the secondary classroom. This first issue of the school year focuses on students' writing—among the descriptions here you'll find students writing for publication, responding to literature, sending e-mail queries about college life to school alumni, writing letters, and reading and combining phrases in a collaborative poetry writing exercise.These are all ideas your colleagues have found effective and inspiring in their classrooms, and we hope you'll find them equally valuable.

If you're a longtime *NOTES Plus* subscriber, the timing of this issue may have caught you by surprise. In the past, the first issue of the school year has been mailed in October; with this August issue of *Notes Plus,* we begin a new publishing schedule that we hope will be even more convenient for our readers. By putting the first fall issue in readers' hands in August, we hope to provide teachers with a bit more time to peruse and customize ideas and strategies for the coming year. And you won't have long to wait for the sixteenth edition of *IDEAS Plus,* the annual companion volume to *NOTES Plus. IDEAS Plus Book 16* will be mailed to NCTE Plus members in September.

The remaining three *NOTES Plus* issues in this publication year will be published in October, January, and April.

Cricket Contests as Class Exercises

Cricket Magazine is a monthly magazine containing high quality literature and art for children and young people ages 8–14. Stories and articles range from international folktales and contemporary children's life to history, biography, and science.

Each month *Cricket* announces a contest involving a topic in art, poetry, or the short story, and of these, I find three or four a year that serve as fine class exercises. The limited topics, the typical line or word maximums, and the purpose of writing for a wider audience all make these *Cricket* contests perfect for my middle school students.

Poetry Pre-Writing

Take the January 1998 contest, for instance:

> See a string and pick it up and all the day you'll have good luck.
>
> See a string and let it lie, you'll need some string before you die.
>
> Rope and string are tricky things—just ask Metok from "A Greenland Rope Trick" or Hank from "The Yo-Yo Man." For this month's contest, we'd like you to write a poem that involves, in one way or another, a nice length of cord, be it rope, string, yarn, or cable. What can you do with a rope or string? Fly a kite, climb a mountain, tie someone's shoelaces together—why, there are a thousand things. Get your poetic juices flowing and tell us what tricks you'd do with string and rope. Just keep your entry to 25 lines or fewer!

I read aloud or summarize the stories referred to, showing the illustrations that go with them. Then I pass

around pieces of scratch paper, usually quarter sheets, since I want a very brief first response. *Cricket's* prompt always stimulates with specific examples, and I want students to generate additional ones. I ask them to write down the first kind of rope that comes to mind or to write down an action involving a rope. If they wish, they can use a phrase or sentence about any memorable personal experience with a rope.

After three minutes, I collect students' responses and read them aloud, while a volunteer writes unique responses on the board. For the rope poem, our list looked something like this: *noose, twist, jump, lariat, braid, Double Dutch, clothesline, knot bellringing, lasso, kite flying, coils, tying up a captive, parachute, Peter Pan flying on stage, pulling a sled, tennis net, acrobat's net, spider web, tug-of-war, bungee jumping, dog leash.*

"Now," I say, "don't tell me you can't think of anything to write about. Here's proof you can." I give students a copy of the *Cricket* prompt and allow several days for a draft. I remind them that rhyme and free verse are equally acceptable. Poems are always limited to 25 lines.

Polishing

I never tell students that they *must* change anything. They don't even have to submit the poem to *Cricket* unless they want to. But students do receive a grade for assigned writing. I explain to students that if vivid, specific words develop a creative situation, the poem will receive an A. If the poem develops an ordinary situation or one already brought up with *some* vivid words or fresh perspective, the poem will receive a B. If it doesn't seem to contain fresh ideas, but does fulfill the assignment, it will be a C.

I underline words that can be made more vivid, e.g., "he *goes* out" when the context reveals that *stomps* or *slams the door* would be more specific. I write comments about what isn't clear or what seems trite. Either students or I sometimes read poems aloud at this point.

Students are then ready to prepare a clean copy for submission to *Cricket,* if they wish, or to revise their work for a higher grade.

Judging

I create a banner for a bulletin board and display *all* poems printed on fresh paper. This makes every student who completes the full process a classroom winner, whether or not any submissions from the class receive a prize from *Cricket.*

Cricket does its part to reward students, typically sending a card to one or two in the class, even noting if an entry comes very close to a merit citation. *Cricket* gives First, Second, and Third Places and five to ten Honorable Mentions. The place winners receive the gift of a book, and honorable mentions receive certificates. *Cricket* also sends notices to local newspapers if the students return the forms naming the hometown paper.

Of course, judging is always subjective, and I remind students that the competition is meant to prompt some enjoyable writing and sharing, and not to be taken too seriously.

At this point I can think of many excellent poems that did not happen to win. Of the following four rope poems, one took First Place, one received an Honorable Mention, and two are ones I thought would be the most likely to win. Can you identify which is which?*

1. *Strings of Life*

The boy is walking down the street.
The piece of string is held
limp in his hands, swaying in the wind.
Down the walk a girl is jumping rope
A boy is playing with a yo-yo
High in the sky there is a
kite being flown.
Inside the house the lady with the
necklace sits making a bracelet
while her grandmother sews.
Inside a man sits with a noose
looking and thinking and looking
and thinking.
Out on the dock the whistles blow
and the ships put up their sails and
the fishermen reel their rods and

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pull up their nets.
The boy is still walking on the street.
His shoes still flap against the pavement,
and his string still sways in the wind.
—Jocelyn Ross

2. *Swinging*

The rope beneath me conforms,
Supporting me,
Holding me,
Encasing me.
I rock with ease,
Relaxing with every gentle
Movement.
The squeaking of the worn rope does not
Bother me,
But makes me feel
Comfortable.
Rocking, with every
Twitch and
Breeze.
Slowly, I begin to drift away.
Away from the Hammock
Which I rest in.
I leave,
To another peaceful world
All in the comfort of the
Delicately
Entwined
Ropes.
—Andrea Goodall

3. *The Last Rope Tow*

As night falls on the quiet slope,
only the murmur of George the cat,
caressing and smoothing the snow.
Lights dancing where skiers carved moguls.
Cold wind flows down the valley;
Charlotte sighs and whispers to
Big Clyde, the #1 lift,
"It was a bad day."
"What do you mean?"
"They're heavier this year.
They wear me down,
so difficult to carry.
Sometimes I wobble and shake,
and watch them fall."
"Hard for me, too," says Big Clyde.
"All the children laughing and talking
about the fun they will have
on that new gondola."
"Is that so bad?"
"They don't want us, Charlotte;
they don't like the slow ride."
—Evan Cording

4. *The Cord*

I'm lying here
the room is bright,
white.
I'm in labor
it's my first,
and something puzzles me.
The umbililical cord is long,
hollow
wet,
and for some reason
I don't want to let go,
to stop this tube
which connected me to my baby for
nine months.
But, I must.
The crying starts,
the pulsing stops
and it's time
to cut
the cord.
"All except for that little one,
she ignores their laughter
and holds tighter to my rope."
—Alexandra Zodhiates

*Judging results for the rope poems:
#1 my pick
#2 *Cricket* Honorable Mention
#3 *Cricket* First Place
#4 my pick

I find *Cricket* ideal inspiration for creative writing because of its regularity, quick processing, and rules. Prose is limited to 350 words—perfect for middle schoolers to tell a good story, yet learn how to edit out what isn't important and to enrich with vivid specific detail.

Rosemary Laughlin, University High School, Urbana, Illinois

(A one-year, 12-issue subscription to *Cricket Magazine* is $32.97. Write to *Cricket Magazine* Group, Box 7434, Red Oak, IA 51591-2434 or call 1-800-827-0227. Visit the Cricket Web site at www.cricketmag.com.)

Body Biography Revisited

At my district's last textbook adoption in 1992, I was searching for a way to help my juniors relate the readings in our semester-length American literature course more directly to their own lives. My inspiration came from an article in the December 1987 *English Journal*; in "The Body Biography: A Framework for Student Writing," I had read how William Underwood guided his eighth graders through a series of activities that culminated in a display of students' selected writings on lifesize outlines of their bodies.

I decided to organize reading choices for the first nine weeks of American Literature under three broad categories: literature exploring the identity of the self, literature exploring an individual's relationships to others, and literature exploring an individual's dreams.

I explained to students that in addition to a traditional analysis of these readings, they would be writing and revising material for their own "body biographies," where they would examine their *selves,* their *relationships,* and their *dreams.* The set of writing assignments I designed asked students to extend from the class readings in a personal way, and the literal body outlines offered a fun goal to work toward and a creative way to share the results.

Throughout the grading period students built a portfolio of thirteen short writings. For example, after reading the compact summaries of the lives of "Lucinda Matlock" and "Richard Cory," students focused on the details of their own lives in an autobiographical poem.

After discussing the relationships among a teenager, his father, and his coach in an excerpt from *Prince of Tides,* students wrote a letter to someone who had touched them in a special way.

And after learning how "The First Appendectomy" performed by William Nolen almost ended his dream of becoming a surgeon, students imagined how their dreams for the future might unfold.

Below is a brief listing of each assignment:

1. Your Early Identity:
What does your name mean? How was it chosen? Does it fit you?
What baby story does your family tell about you?

2. Two-Tone Poem:
Using color metaphors and similes, write about your inner/outer self or what you're like in different moods.*

3. An Accomplishment:
In a paragraph tell what you're proud of, how you did it, and why it gives you satisfaction.

4. Auto-Bio Poem:
Write—with detail—about your fears, loves, hates, hopes . . .*

5. Adult Advice:
Using a creative format (e.g., letter, song, poem, short story), write the advice you imagine one of your parents or another adult might give you as you leave home after high school.

6. Letter of Confirmation:
Write a letter telling someone how and why she/he has been important in your life. You may write to someone living or dead, real or fictional (e.g., your sister, Elvis Presley, Joyce Carol Oates, Batman).**

7. Views of You:
Ask four people you trust to complete a sentence metaphor about you; responders might include relatives, friends, teachers, or employers. Do a fifth sentence about yourself (e.g., If *Cher* were a *car,* she'd be *a red Porsche* because she's *sleek and gorgeous*).

8. Life Metaphor Poem:
Write an extended metaphor showing your view of life, whether optimistic, fearful, pessimistic, realistic, etc., beginning "Life is a . . ."*

9. Vivid Sketches:
Write three or four brief sketches of friends, pets, or family. Each sketch should *show* rather than *tell* what you have glimpsed about the character of your subject.

10. Memory:
After freewriting about an earliest memory, a memory of a personal "first," and a best memory, expand one into a two-page narrative or descriptive piece.

11. Favorite Place Poem:
Envision yourself in a place you enjoy being, and then use imagery to recreate your sensory experience for the reader.

12. Future Dreams:
Using a creative format (e.g., a chat with your grandchild, a trip in a time machine, your epitaph and obituary, your interview for *People* magazine), tell what your future holds.

13. Your Choice:
Write on any topic in any style and format that reflect your interests.

Ultimately, students each displayed at least six of their writings in and around their body outlines. To make each presentation unique and more attractive, students also used colors, snapshots, collages, old letters, souvenirs, buttons, clippings, drawings, and even clothing. We spent only two and a half class periods tracing bodies and beginning to assemble the contents of the outlines, but the fun and laughter of those 120 minutes and the pride in the final products, hung around the room on "Gallery Day," were well worth the time invested.

William Underwood wrote that he was "convinced this assignment could be successfully adapted to many teaching situations." Having applied his idea over ten semesters, involving some 900 students, I agree!

*These three assignments were based on models from *Your Turn: 33 Lessons in Poetry* by Louise Finn, published by J. Weston Walch.

**This assignment was based on an idea in "Letters: The Personal Touch in Writing" by Allan E. Dittmer in *English Journal,* January 1991.

Linda S. Slusser, North Ridgeville High School, North Ridgeville, Ohio

A "No-Contest" Celebration of Writing

Student writing contests pose a problem for me. On the one hand, I'm eager to help student writers gain recognition; on the other hand, I want to nurture *all* my students' love of writing, not just to select or single out a few writers.

It took one of my students to suggest to me a desirable student-centered approach to contests. Rafael was crestfallen when his poem was not selected as a winning entry in a local contest. We discussed the fact that a writer needs to believe in his or her own ability and commitment over the long haul despite inevitable rejection of that work by publishers, editors, and reviewers. Our discussion seemed to somewhat mitigate his disappointment.

Then Rafael had an idea: "Why can't we have a 'no-contest contest' in our classroom or maybe sharing with Ms. K's class, where there would be no prizes and no judges? All we would need to do is to pick a topic. Then everyone would write for it who wanted to."

As I listened, Rafael fleshed out his idea. "We could hold a celebration where everyone could get up and read their piece or have someone else read it. Everyone would get comments and applause from the students. Everyone would be a writer reading or a writer listening to other writers. When you read a book in the library you don't usually see 'first place contest winner' on the cover. Every writer gets judged on the writing in the book."

I asked Rafael to present his idea to the class to get feedback, and the other students loved it. One student suggested we give gold-embossed certificates and trophies to all student participants. Another student suggested that during art class students create blue writer's ribbons to be worn by all student writers.

Several students wanted parents, family members, and caregivers invited to the Writer's Circle reading. One student even suggested that these adults be invited to write on the topics as well. The majority of students wanted an annotated publication to come out of their "No Contest" to include not only their writings, but also their comments about the writing process.

Finally, the students agreed on two topics for the contest—"Lost and Found" and "Wishes"—so that student writers who weren't particularly inspired by a single topic had two options.

A student advisory board of four students volunteered to serve. These students were in charge of the following duties:

- collecting and cataloguing the submissions (in alphabetical last name order and by topic);
- preparing manuscripts (which I as teacher supported the students in revising) for publication;
- designing "No Contest" Writers Circle invitations and certificates (we couldn't afford trophies or medallions);
- room decoration (we were using a larger room to hold at least one "guest" class and our class community guests); and
- developing a feedback form for attendees.

While only about a third of my students responded to our call for writings, this number was still much greater than the usual contest limit of three entries per class per teacher. Furthermore, there was more of a focus on revising, enhancing, and improving the writing for the sharing session with the Circle audience and readers, as opposed to a focus on winning.

On the day of our Writers Circle "No Contest" event, I was pleasantly surprised not only by the festive look of the site, but also the dressed-up appearance of our writer contributors. Indeed, a few looked like they were ready for a catered wedding!

The audience members were subdued and respectful as the writers and their guests (family members, caregivers) took the reserved seats. The audience members received programs with the writers' names alphabetically listed alongside the topic option they had selected. The titles students gave their essays were also included.

A student emcee introduced each writer contributor. The writers went up to the mike accompanied by one or more of their guests. There was generous applause after each reading and certificates were presented to all the writers. At the emcee's request, the audience was encouraged to comment on each piece.

When all pieces had been read, the publication was distributed. We all adjourned to the cafeteria for home-baked refreshments prepared by the student committee.

The students want to run another "No Contest" Writers Circle event at the end of the school year. We will expand it to include two more classes and make an audiocassette recording to go with our publication. Other teachers want to try out our "No Contest" model within their own classroom sites.

While prize-driven contests will always be around, a "No Contest" contest allows language arts educators to nurture their evolving student writers in an inclusive writers' community.

Not only does a "No Contest" Writers Circle celebrate all the contributing authors in an equitable fashion, but it motivates and inspires those who did not opt

to contribute. Participating writers receive immediate peer feedback as well as the chance to share their literacy achievements with their families.

Rose Reissmann, Community School District #1, New York, New York

Living Poems: Helping Students to Visualize Poetry

One of the hardest concepts for students to grasp when writing poetry is that poetry, like all good writing, needs revision. This exercise, which is a spin-off on choral readings and found poetry, helps my seventh-grade students to "see" a poem as a live object with movement and structure.

What is needed for the activity is a short piece of writing which contains beautiful language. I use chapter 13 of Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet,* but any chapter from a novel, or an entire short story, with interesting vocabulary can be used (Sandra Cisneros works nicely as well).

To begin, I hand out a colored index card to each student. I make sure that each section of the classroom has a different color, so that later identification can be made based on the card's original placement. I tell students to put the card aside until after we read the chapter.

I then read the chapter aloud in class. When completed, I ask students to silently re-read the passages we just read and skim for "beautiful or interesting language." I further explain that any phrase or individual word which "jumps out" at them can be used. I ask that they make sure their selection is less than a full sentence in length. Students are to write their selection onto the index card.

The choral portion of the exercise is next. With phrases in hand (I have one too), we all stand and go around the room clockwise, reading our portion. One of the first thing students say is, "John and I read the same thing," or "Maria took her phrase from the same paragraph where I found mine." Students are often startled to see who shared their thoughts.

I then introduce the idea that these words together might actually form a poem. We go around again, trying to pick up a fluid pace as one voice is followed by another. "How does it sound to you?" I ask. "Do you think these phrases are in the right place?" We begin to revise.

Students move around the room, combining their words in new ways with those held by their classmates. Some opt for repetition—putting two occurrences of the phrase "tough hope" next to one another or deciding that the word "madness" should both begin and end the poem. We read it again. There is a slight adjustment as two students swap their places in the circle. Finally, we are content with our class's "found poem," and, with the lights turned off and voices raised, we read our perfectly revised poem.

As a closing piece to this lesson, I ask students to hold up their cards, noticing how far away they have moved from their original places. Pink, green, white, blue, and orange index cards are intermixed, although they began in such an orderly fashion. Looking around the room, I believe the students now truly understand the creative process and the revision of poetry in very different ways.

I collect the cards in the order they have closed with, and type the poem for them to keep in their journals.

The lesson can end there, if you choose to keep it contained within one class session. However, the "Living Poem" activity can also be extended in a number of ways.

If you have more than one class, share all sections' poems with each other. This furthers the discussion of powerful editing and revision, for each class's poem will be quite different, even when using the same original language.

It is also interesting to type the class poem(s) using various free verse formats, playing with white space. This can then become another topic of examination, by asking the students questions such as, "Why did I type the poem like this? How else might it look on the page? What effect does the spacing give the poem?" Students may then wish to write their own, original poetry and play with free verse and white space.

Julie Medow, Woodmere Middle School, Hewlett, New York

Helping Students Keep in Touch

Here's a suggestion especially applicable to a high school journalism or English class. This idea could also be used as a special project assignment for an eager group of students in any area of communication.

Freshmen college students who attend out-of-town institutions are often still heavily tied emotionally to their high schools. Students who leave close-knit high school classes for larger, more anonymous colleges may be especially eager for news of what is happening in their alma mater, and college students can be a valuable source of advice and information to high school students who have questions or worries about going to college.

My suggestion is that a group of computer literate high school students, under a sponsor's supervision, set up a Web page where alumni can check regularly for

news of their high school and home town. In return, several alumni currently enrolled in college can be asked to share via e-mail their impressions and advice about college life, including tips to help high school juniors and seniors better prepare for college.

Another possibility, perhaps more easily accomplished, is a college freshman e-mail group, comprised of students who send their e-mail addresses to their high schools for inclusion on an e-mail mailing list. Either a teacher or a student could send a weekly e-mail to all the recipients, informing them of interesting school news and passing along questions generated by high school students who want to know what college life is like. The college students could then e-mail back responses and advice at their leisure.

I have found e-mail invaluable for keeping touch with former students of mine. Not only does it make it easy and convenient to keep in touch, but it also serves as an example of casual, informal, and amusing writing to show to the high school students in my classes.

I have remained in touch with some of my students for several years through e-mail, and cherish the growth I see in them through their writing. This resource is one which must not be overlooked as a painless teaching tool for writing.

Joyce Taaffe, Wheeler High School, Marietta, Georgia

A Love Affair with Letter Writing

Several years ago I noticed a request in an NCTE publication for pen pals in Russia. Since my classes were going to be reading "An Apartment in Moscow" soon, I responded. The ensuing letter exchange between the Russian teacher and me has now lasted five years and provided many of my students with "pen friends." We enjoy learning more about each other's countries, schools, and families. This correspondence was especially valuable when we later read *The Captain's Daughter*.

The next year I noticed a request for Japanese pen pals in our local newspaper. Since we had recently read *Hiroshima*, this was a great opportunity for students to learn more about present-day Japan.

Another year I asked my daughter, a teacher in a different city, if her second-grade students would participate in a letter exchange. They had some interesting questions for the 10th graders, and my students loved telling the younger students all about their exciting or dull teen-age lives.

And every year when the Ann Landers and Dear Abby columns request that readers write to service people during the holidays, I pass this information on to my students.

I find letter writing assignments like these to be a great opportunity for students to practice their writing skills. They have to write legibly in standard English, be conscious of slang expressions (especially if they're writing to someone in another country), organize the letter appropriately, and provide clear details. They also develop a sense of audience, depending on whether they are writing to a second grader, a military service person, or a teenager in a foreign country.

The only requirement I make is that the students bring me the letter and a stamped, addressed envelope. For each letter, I offer some sort of extra credit. But the true reward comes when students receive replies to their letters and rush into class to share them with me and their classmates.

In addition to improving their own writing and proofreading skills through letter writing, students also become aware of their own usage mistakes. Once a student asked me, "Do you think my pen pal will find 'a lot' in his Russian/English dictionary?" When I looked skeptical, he decided to use another word, since "a lot would be a piece of land, wouldn't it?" he noted.

Margaret Oberender, Westwood High School, Austin, Texas

Using Color in Writing Revision

The activity outlined below is a revision strategy meant to help students notice the areas in their writings where details and elaboration of details are missing.

I used this activity in particular as part of a three-part autobiography project in which, during part one, students wrote descriptions of their communities. However, I think it is easily adaptable to any writing that has as one of its goals deep description.

Students will need the following:

- a substantial draft of a descriptive writing-in-progress
- crayons, colored pencils, or markers (ideally one pack per student pair)
- drawing paper (8 ½" x 11"copy paper works fine)
- pencils (pens won't work here!)

Ask students to get in pairs and exchange drafts. Students first read one another's work silently, and then reread one another's work out loud (but quietly) to themselves. I find that this step helps many of my students really capture the images that are in their partners' works.

Next each student draws and colors in what is described in his or her partner's writing, using a pencil to

"gray in" areas in the writing where details are missing. When giving students directions for this activity, it is important to stress that they must color in only what is there in the writing—everything else must be left gray.

After partners are finished with their illustrations, they return the draft and drawing to its original owner. It is each partner's responsibility to invite the writer into a conversation about parts of the draft that need to be clearer.

Students should have the opportunity to give each other friendly, constructive criticism and then time to act on their partner's suggestions through scheduled writing/revision time, which may lead into a second and even third class day.

Though instructions emphasize that students should only give color and form to what's really in their partners' writings, students almost always draw and color things that aren't in the text, but that they themselves bring to the reading.

It is a magical experience indeed when readers' assumptions are brought to the forefront in this way! This can lead to a wonderful discussion of the connection between writers and readers (i.e., audience) structured around questions like these:

- What can we say about the kinds of assumptions we bring to our reading?
- Where do these assumptions come from?
- When should a writer allow for the possibility of reader assumptions about events/situations described in the work and when should he/she strive to leave nothing to chance?
- What role does the writer's understanding of the audience play in decisions about when to include or leave out details of an event/situation?

Dawnelle Hyland, Chewning Middle School, Durham, North Carolina

A "Real World" Peer Edit Session

The college application essay has always posed as many difficulties for me as it has for my students. How do I help students understand an admissions officer's perspective? How do I show them the value of writing a distinctive essay, one that will make an impression on the reader? How do I encourage them to consider the strengths and weaknesses communicated in their essays? The best way to address all these difficulties, I found, is to ask the students to play the role of college admissions officers themselves.

This activity takes place *after* students have written college application essays. Students in my class write general essays on their strengths and weaknesses, based on the application requirements of local colleges that are popular with our graduates. But depending on the school, the application process may require a general essay written on a topic of the student's own choosing, or it might require that the student respond to a particular prompt, such as "Write an essay of approximately 500 words describing why you would like to attend this school and how you believe you would benefit from the educational experience offered here."

I set a deadline for when typed final drafts are due, but I ask that the students not put their names on the papers. Instead, I ask them to identify their papers with a number. (It's not necessary for me to know which number goes with which student; the numbers only make it easier to hand the papers back.) Once I've collected the papers, I hold them for one or two class days to give students a mental break from their essays and then I surprise them with a different kind of peer edit lesson.

Before class starts, I prepare my materials. I choose the names of five colleges that are popular first choices at our school. I put the name of each college on a pen (using masking tape), on a folder filled with three or four essays, on an envelope containing typed instructions, and on a pack of six or eight copies of the worksheet shown below. (Each student will need two copies.)

Worksheet

Name of College or University: _____

Name of Admissions Officer: _____

Applicant Number: _____

After you have read through the essay once, answer the following questions.

1. Did you enjoy reading the essay? Were there writing problems (grammar, spelling, awkward or vague sentences) that interfered with your enjoyment? (Please identify writing problems on the essay if you find them.)

2. Compared with other college essays you have read, does this one stand out in any way? Why or why not?

3. What does this essay communicate about the candidate? Please write a list of at least five qualities and try to be very specific. If you can write more than five, please do so. The candidate will benefit from knowing exactly how she comes across on paper.

4. Do you have advice on how the applicant can improve the essay in order to gain admittance to your school? For example should the applicant write a better, more engaging opening; add more sensory details to make the experiences come to life; find a "creative hook" to make the essay more interesting to read; focus on communicating more of his or her strengths; or make other changes?

5. Did the candidate conform to the requirements stated on the application? If responding to a specific question, does the candidate answer the question appropriately? If there are no stated requirements, has the candidate chosen a good topic that will communicate what the college wants to know? Explain your responses.

I greet the students at the door and dispense the materials, asking the students to get into groups according to the college name on their item. I then ask those with envelopes to read the following instructions out loud to their group:

You are college admissions officers at _____ University/College. It's your job to evaluate the candidates' essays contained in your folder. Use the worksheets to help guide your evaluation. Fill them out honestly because they will be returned to the candidates. You may sign your name or you may keep your evaluation anonymous. I would urge you to sign your names as your good faith acknowledgment that you have set out to help the candidates through constructive criticism. Each admissions officer should read and evaluate two essays. If you happen to recognize an essay, choose another.

In addition, to help students adopt the mindset of admissions officers, I give them the following tips to think about:

A typical admissions officer wants to be helpful to all the candidates, but realizes that he or she can't accept every student who applies. Since the goal is to select students who will be able to both benefit from and contribute to the educational experience at the school, the admissions officer looks for indications that the student is mentally prepared, interested in learning, and has ideas and energy to help him or her meet the challenges of college. The admissions officer looks for essays that seem genuine and that provide a real sense of who the student is. And since it may be difficult to choose among many qualified applicants and many similar admission essays, he or she keeps an eye out for any characteristic of an essay that makes the student stand out as a candidate—whether an ingenious opening, well chosen details, anecdotes about past experience that are especially appropriate, or persuasive language.

Students spend the class period evaluating the essays. At the end of the period, students are eager to read the peer feedback, so I collect the essays and pass them back to their authors with the two evaluation sheets. I also tell them they have another opportunity to rewrite before handing the paper back to me for a grade.

Besides providing valuable feedback from two other readers, this lesson forces students to think about their own essays from a new perspective. After reading other essays, they can appreciate better the need for writing a piece that will stand out from the rest and that will communicate important strengths about themselves. Also, students know in their own minds whether they would have accepted or rejected candidates based on their essays, and this insight enables them to revise their own papers with a clearer understanding of purpose and audience.

Katherine Early, Mount Saint Joseph Academy, Flourtown, Pennsylvania

Share the Wealth: Highlights from Recent NCTE Publications

Reshaping High School English

In this issue, we present an excerpt from Chapter 3 of Reshaping High School English (NCTE, 1997), *written by Bruce Pirie, a teacher at Lorne Park Secondary School, Mississauga, Ontario.*

Pirie describes Reshaping High School English *as an effort to think carefully about the direction of English teaching, to ask what this subject could and should be in the coming years. In describing the intent of his book, the author says that he is "pulled in two directions." While he does talk about lessons and assignments that have worked for him and for others, he resists the urge to dwell on strategies at the expense of "synthesizing and clarifying a larger vision." After all, he says, "when our students read a novel, we count their reading a failure if they remain glued to isolated details of plot and character and cannot step back to consider larger questions of theme and purpose. Surely, by analogy, we should value our own acts of professional stepping back and envisioning, seeing something beyond tomorrow's lesson."*

Media Study: Non-Transparent Constructions

British media education guru Len Masterman (1993) speaks of a "first principle" of media study—the principle of "non-transparency," precisely the element that seemed absent from the short story classroom visited at the beginning of the chapter.

[The principle of non-transparency] insists that the media are rather more than simple "windows on the world" or "mirrors" which reflect external reality in a way which needs no further explanation. It insists that TV, newspapers, films, radio, and advertisements are actively *produced.* They are involved, that is, in a process of *constructing* or *representing* reality rather than

simply transmitting or reflecting it.

If we choose to retain the "window on the world" metaphor, we must admit that all windows limit (as well as enhance) our vision: they have a frame and a position on one side of the building only. The glass in the window may be dusty, scratched, tinted, or distorting.

Students can be engaged in considering the implications of this principle by as simple a task as imagining that they are yearbook photographers assigned the job of snapping one—only one—photo of their class in action. What would that one picture be? The teacher at the front of the room? Students listening? Students busy at written work? Discussing among themselves? A sample piece of work? A revealing shot of a student dozing at the back of the room?

No matter which shot the photographer chooses, the others are omitted. What you have will be only a still photo: all the movements, sounds, and smells that are part of life will be excluded. The class will not be *presented* in the yearbook; it will be *represented* by someone's choice of how to construct a version of its reality. And this is exactly what happens when a news event is represented by one photo in the newspaper, or by a half column of print, or by a sixty-second TV news item.

The next step is to apply this concept to various media. What are we allowed to "see" about family life from a situation comedy, a TV drama, a Norman Rockwell painting, a sociology textbook, a parenting magazine, or novel? What frames and built-in filters does each medium bring to its subjects? What topics seem invisible because of those filters?

For example, television naturally prefers the visually exciting, which is why environmental issues received hardly any TV attention until activists learned to stage highly visible events.

This situation isn't inherently *bad*. Individual photos can be hauntingly evocative, and it makes no more sense to complain about television being obsessed with images than it does to complain about compact discs having a lot of sounds on them.

The point is that if we're going to be mature users of media, we have to recognize that each medium has its own ways of constructing realities, ways which offer both limitations and opportunities. . . .

Institutions

Mass media is an industry, subject to large movements of capital, market pressures, and government regulation. The media student, ideally, is aware of social and economic factors that impinge on the kinds of representations available. It would obviously be naive to imagine that popular music comes into our homes just because a musician somewhere thought it would be nice to sing us a song; media education assumes that students need to know something of what goes on to bring music and audience together.

In practice, this can be a difficult area for the media teacher. Understandably, we rely on textbooks for information about the business of media, but the field is nothing if not current and volatile.

The long production time required by textbooks renders most of them out-of-date before they arrive in the classroom. Once an expensive book does arrive, we expect to use it for ten or more years; this leaves students condemned to reading chapters about music promotions and film marketing that happened two decades earlier.

One solution is for the class to become media scavengers, on the look-out for current institutional issues that lend themselves to research and discussion. In the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, there was a flurry of media self-examination, including articles on how the producers of high-tech weaponry had corporate links with major news sources that spotlighted military technology. Periodic takeover bids among media giants can also be counted on to spark articles listing current holdings of major companies, and Internet resources put a great deal of corporate information within reach of students. Similarly, debates about censorship and government regulation regularly flare up.

I don't feel compelled to be absolutely thorough about any of these issues: we can't, in any case, and knowing Disney's precise corporate holdings this week isn't as important as understanding the general principle that there *are* institutional questions that do make a difference.

Sometimes this can be achieved as easily through classroom simulations. For example, in a media class, I pose the case of a (fictitious) local television station whose educational, family orientation appears to be driving its ratings down. The task is to find a way of rescuing the station. Proposals are prepared by student teams, each of which has an assigned identity. One group might be a production company with plans for a police action drama, another a group of concerned parents. When the class gathers to examine everyone's proposals, we find ourselves wrestling with problems of corporate decision making that have impact on local culture.

Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) observe that one of the most striking differences between media studies and English is the latter's lack of concern for institutional questions (133–34). It is as if the relationship between reader and author is a purely personal matter and the book ends up in the reader's hands just because someone felt like telling a story—in other words, ex-

actly the naive assumption that would be challenged if it appeared in a classroom discussion of the Rolling Stones.

You may counter, "But the Rolling Stones are big business." Yes, and have you looked lately at the book trade, dominated as it is by huge national and multinational corporations? Or, in particular, at the school textbook industry?

Now, before I exasperate my readers, I had better hasten to declare that I'm not trying to turn English into a Business Practices course. I have no taste for making these questions a big part of the program when we have so many other exciting things to do, but I am saying that these issues ought to be mentioned occasionally. Reverence for the capital "C" Culture can create a myth that literature is a sacred text, above mundane commercial concerns, but that is misleading, and students ought to hear at least a passing hint about how the world of culture really works.

At present, this hint is most likely to be heard when we talk about the conditions under which Shakespeare's plays were written and performed. Knowing that the Elizabethan theater catered to a wide spectrum of social classes explains some things about the range of styles in a Shakespearean play, and raises questions about the place of theater in our own time. (Standing room at an original performance of *Romeo and Juliet* cost no more than a beer; today's theater is expensive entertainment for the wealthy. A book, on the other hand, would have cost a year's wages for an Elizabethan worker, if he or she could have read it.)

I am suggesting that that kind of information, perhaps gleaned from editors' introductions and biographies, could be more frequently brought into our discussions, because it *does* make a difference to the kinds of things that happen with text. The student who groans, "Were these Victorian novelists being paid by the word?" ought to find out about the influence of nineteenth-century lending libraries and their pressure for novels in the lucrative three-volume format.

We might as well start with the institution closer to home—the educational establishment which has to a great extent defined what we call "literature." As schools slowly begin to include works outside the traditional canon of "dead white male authors," we can raise questions about this history: "Who decided those old lists? On what basis? Why are they *changing now?*"

Once again, simulations can offer glimpses of institutional debates. Students can role-play curriculum superintendents having to cut books from the course's reading list: which titles would stay, which would fall under the ax, and with what rationale? Where public objections have been raised to the study of a particular title, let that debate enter classroom discussion. (Students are usually staunch defenders of their own freedom to read; it may be necessary to force them to grasp the objecting point-of-view by assigning it as a role-playing exercise.) At its best, this kind of work raises important questions about the role of literacy in education for a modern society, and is that not worth discussing?

This excerpt was reprinted from Reshaping High School English *(NCTE, 1997) by Bruce Pirie.*

Excerpts from NCTE-talk

Suggestions for Teaching Poetry

The e-mail messages in this feature are excerpted from NCTE-talk, an electronic discussion group for teachers that is administered by NCTE. If you have Internet access, you can subscribe to NCTE-talk by sending the following message to majordomo@serv1.ncte.org: subscribe NCTE-talk. The subject line should be left blank, unless you have a mail program that requires an entry in the subject line, in which case, enter a period. For more information, contact Eric Crump at NCTE Headquarters: 800-369-6283, ext. 294; e-mail: ecrump@ncte.org.

Since this is my first year teaching, I'm looking for tips. Any suggestions on teaching poetry to ninth-graders?
Christine Stroble
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Here are a few tips for teaching poetry to 9th graders. These tips mostly come from a workshop by poet Georgia Heard and are intended for any age group, but they confirm my own experience in teaching poetry to 9th graders. She suggests three stages for teachers to keep in mind in order for students to willingly come to enjoy poetry. Some of the activities mentioned following each stage are Ms. Heard's and some are mine (by the way I recommend Georgia Heard's books *For the Good of Earth* and *Sun and Writing Toward Home.*)

Stage one: Read poems that are accessible. Students will later come to learn the pleasure of figuring out difficult poems in stage #three, but the best starting place is with poems where the meaning is readily accessible or where the meaning is secondary to the pure joy of the sound or the play of the language. Good classroom activities at

this stage are to treat the poem as performance art or visual art: students can do choral readings, readings for multiple voices, acting out the poem, dance, music, visual representations, etc., (transmediation).

Stage two: Create opportunities for students to deeply connect to poems in a personal way. At this stage students come to see poems in ways that speak to them personally. Not all poems will do this for all students, of course. So, students should select the poems and lines that touch upon their own lives and explore this connection.

Good classroom activities might include each student creating his/her own self-portrait anthology in which she/he selects the poems that speak to his/her life, each poem accompanied by an explanation for why the student chose it.

Stage three: Open up a poem like you do a puzzle. Once students are comfortable with poems that are accessible and poems that speak to them personally, it is time to discover another pleasure of poetry: delving deeply into exploration of meaning where meaning is not readily accessible. John Ciardi when speaking of poetry said, "Every game ever invented by mankind is a way of making things hard for the fun of it." Students need to discover the pleasure of figuring out meaning from the small clues within the poem.

It is also in this third stage that students are ready to start learning some of the elements of the poets' craft. Time will not allow me to go into all of the activities for doing this, but for delving into meaning you might want to use Rosenblatt's model of efferent and aesthetic response.

You also will want to model the benefit of multiple readings to help meaning unfold. I also use a lot of strategies where students write down their own questions about what confuses them and then I have them guess at the answers to their own questions and then reread for more evidence. To learn the poet's craft there is no better way than for students to write their own poetry and attempt to use some of the elements of poetic craft themselves.

Erica Jong once said in an interview in the *New York Quarterly* that "we learn to write by reading the poets we love over and over and asking ourselves two questions: what are they doing and why are they doing it?" That is good guidance for both delving into meaning as well as learning craft.

Some last words of advice from me. Don't force poetry on them. Don't teach poetry as if it is one more thing to quiz kids on. Allow them time to come to it willingly. I have been out of the classroom for a year in a district office job, but when I was teaching 9th graders, I shared a poem a day. Most were contemporary poets (more accessible to contemporary readers--well, that depends), but I gradually tried to debunk the students' misconceptions about what poetry is. The connection with contemporary music, of course, which they already like, can be made, but the whole point is to experience the pleasure of poetry. Share with them the poems you like and let them know why they speak to you.

I wish I were back in the classroom right now sharing a weird Richard Brautigan poem and looking at the puzzled faces. It's so much fun.

Lind Williams
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First of all, I'd like to second everything that Lind Williams said. If poetry is going to fly at all with kids, its going to fly because they are having fun with it. I try to sell students on the idea that poetry is really a way of playing--with words. If the spirit of play is alive, anything can happen. There are a million things you might try to do, but [here's one lesson] I keep coming back to because it's fun and seems to yield surprising results.

I have the students do what I call "two minute poems." I usually do this the first time toward the end of a class when there are only about 15 minutes left. Tell students that when you give the signal, they are to write a poem (or the beginning of one) and that they will have exactly two minutes. The poem can be about anything at all: the only constraints are that 1) it must be original today, not written down from memory and that 2) they must try to keep the pen moving for the two minutes, even if they are writing "I am so hungry today/I have nothing to write/so I'm writing this/by the window light" etc.

Make a show of counting down . . . pencils ready, 5,4,3,2,1 go! Walk around

the room; if anyone isn't writing, tell them "write first, think later". If everyone is into it, cheat a little and give them three minutes. Maybe do one of you own at the board while they are working.

At time's end, go "BZZZZZT! Time's up" If you want, have a few students read their poems. Praise what there is to be praised. Don't spend more than two or three minutes all told doing this, though. Don't make it into a "lesson".

Then say, "Okay, part two. I'm going to give you another two minutes, but this time the game is to write something COMPLETELY different from what you just wrote. If your first poem rhymed, the second one shouldn't. If the first poem was about flowers, make the second one about spiders from Mars. If you used little teeny words in your first poem, use the biggest words you know in the second. Your goal should be to make it seem like the second poem was written by an entirely different author. Questions? Okay, 5,4,3,2,1 go"

When they're done, ask them to put a check mark next to the poem they think came out better. Collect the papers; take them home, select 5-10 of the more interesting or various attempts and type them up on a single sheet of paper. Leave off the names, at least for the first or second time you do this.

Next day in class, give everyone a sheet of the poems and ask for volunteers to read the poems out loud, one at a time. (You may want to preface this by explaining that the poems have been kept anonymous for a purpose. Students wanting to take credit for a poem may do so, but otherwise we should respect their privacy--even if we know who they are.) After each reading, ask the students to tell first what statements of *fact* they can make about the poem, which might include for each poem what way(s) in which it is different from the ones already read.

When you're done, ask the students to put a check mark next to the TWO poems on the list they like the most for whatever reasons. While they're doing this, list the poems by first line on the board. Ask for the total number of "votes" for each poem by a show of hands. Nine times out of ten, all poems will get at least one vote, but one or two will get a lot. Ask the students what made them choose that poem.

From here there are lots of places to go. Possibilities include:

1) You could ask the students to pick the poem they like best and for homework write something like that of their own.

2) You could take one of the poems, write it on the board, and ask the class to help you make it grow . . . after all, there's only two minutes work there. So, what would make a good next line? and another? and another? You can model the thought processes that one goes through in writing, talk about the suggestions students make, play around with the idea of writing the poem.

3) You could choose some poems that *you* like from whatever sources you have that bounce off the student poems in interesting ways.

4) You could do the exercise over again, putting some (playful) constraints on it, like, for example, you can only use one-syllable words, or you can't use the letter e, or you have to use all the letters of your first and last name every four lines.

Hope this is of some help.

Bruce Schauble
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I usually start with some modeling. I bring in poems that I like (and I think my students will like--usually lighthearted and funny, often irreverent) and share them and talk about why I like them. I then ask the students to do the same. I provide poetry books and journals they may use, and I also invite them to share song lyrics . . . as long as the words are what they really like about the song. This is usually a real kick and can give you some insight into your students as people (I like to do it early in the school year).

From there, I've gone a lot of different directions. I've had students make their own anthologies on themes, study different forms, pursue particular poets, and write their own poems.

Samantha Dunaway
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I like Stafford's book *Getting the Knack*.

By the way, my 7th graders and I have decided to have a "coffee house" in December. Drawn-on goatees, candles, bongos, the works. I originally thought we would stick with just the beat poets and use them as models so the kids could

write their own beat poetry. But there's too much good stuff out there to limit it to Stafford, Bly, Snyder, etc.—-wonderful as they are. Today the kids attempted a copy change of one of Bly's poems. It was tough and the kids really floundered but I think it was a good experience anyway. Yesterday we played around with one of Langston Hughes blues poems. The kids loved it. Tomorrow—-Rita Dove. The kids are also working on I-Searches, so once we get those out of the way we can really dive into more poetry.

I think events (or Sizemore's "exhibitions") are good ways to focus, motivate, challenge kids. And the coffee house idea is really just a way for kids to publish.

I don't "do" a poetry unit, by the way. I use poetry all the time. There are a lot of good lessons about writing that can be taught through poetry—economy of expression, figurative language, theme, focus, voice, point of view, description. And for middle school kids, who are sort of naturally attention deficit to begin with, it has the added charm of being shorter than a lot of prose. That doesn't mean we don't do prose, mind you. Poetry just seems to work nicely into a lot of lessons.

Nancy G. Patterson
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To jump into the "idea" discussion--let me share something I started this week that was received with excitement by my students: For a while now I've wanted to invest in a set of those "magnetic poetry" words (small word-magnets that one might use on a refrigerator to create poetry)--I just didn't want to part with $20 to acquire them. I had dreams of creating a BIG set of words for my classroom, only I never got around to it.

Then I came across a news article which described how the Minneapolis-based company Magnetic Poetry is building "poetry walls" in Minneapolis, Boston, New York, D.C., Denver, L.A., and Austin, Texas in time for April--National Poetry Month. "The 8 foot x 20 foot walls carry thousands of word tiles that passers-by arrange into verse."

That was it--I had to have a poetry wall in my room. I challenged my students to "harvest" favorite lines from their favorite poems; the words from these poets will provide the words for our wall. We spent a period reading-remembering-and-reminiscing poetry, looking through all the poetry collections in my classroom library. I included lit anthologies from earlier grades (I work primarily with seniors) so that students who remembered poems from other classes could find them. Many students even remembered poems they had memorized as elementary students--and still loved!

I made some sample "word tiles" to start us off. (Yes, my classroom is blessed with 2 large chalkboards which magnets "stick" to.) I word processed a stanza from one of my favorite poems using 48-point type, then glued each separate word to a piece of corrugated cardboard. I put a strip-magnet on the back (readily available in craft stores--they come by the roll, and you cut off desired lengths with scissors.)

We surveyed the poetry collections Thursday, and today our poetry wall has begun to grow. Students immediately used study hall time to get to the computer lab; I'm providing the cardboard and strip magnets. By the time April rolls around, we should have a sizeable collection of words for poem-building. (Actually, a few new poems were born today.) I am also collecting the names of the poets we've "harvested" words from, and their names will form a border around our wall.

I hope I haven't infringed on any magnetic poetry copyright. This is an idea my students and I are having a great time with, and I wanted to share it!

Jan Bowman
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When I first got a Magnetic Poetry Kit as a gift a couple of years ago, I didn't think I'd ever use it with kids, because it seemed so restrictive, but shortly after I got it, one of my most left-brained, analytical friends came in, picked it up, and filled my refrigerator with poems. She said it was somehow liberating to have a finite supply of words. Her first effort consisted of long sentences, and as she was grousing about needing another "the," I mentioned that it wasn't exactly a power word, and you could see the light go on. Her next poem was much more spare, economical, poetic.

Since then I've added a kid's kit, which has larger, easier-to-handle words and a backboard for easy display. I've

used the amalgamated kit with groups ranging from incarcerated boys to my women's group. Last week I used it one-on-one with a young woman who had never written a poem before. It's always a huge hit. Recently I came across another adaptation, in a book called *Poemcrazy*, that involves using rolls of tickets as the base for new words. (A roll of 2000 is only a few dollars at Office Depot.)

While we're on the subject of poetry, I also checked out the Web site of the Academy of American Poets. Among other gems there, I found some great suggestions for celebrating National Poetry Month. The URL is http://www.poets.org.

I recommend a zany book called *The Adventure of Dr. Alphabet* (by Dave Morice). It's subtitled "104 Unusual Ways to Write Poetry in the Classroom and in the Community," and it's filled with similar ideas for creating more excitement about poetry.

Gloria Pipkin
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I teach college, but I like *The Practice of Poetry*, edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell. Lots of luscious exercise ideas. Even better, in my opinion, is Steve Kowit's *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop* (Tilbury House Publishers, 1995). A very lively, accessible style, good example poems, and plenty of exercise ideas, too.

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The World Is Your Classroom

Opportunities and Resources for Teachers and Students

"Flight of Icarus" Poetry Forum

Teachers and students are invited to write poems and stories exploring the myth of Icarus and to submit them for a poetry forum scheduled for the spring of 1999. The forum will include work by adults and young people, and will be held in conjunction with "The Flight of Icarus," an exhibition of photographs of the Icarus sculpture by internationally known sculptor Charles Umlauf. The exhibition will be on view at the Umlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum in Austin, Texas, from October 1998 through April 1999. The exhibit will also include recordings of stories about flight and translations of the Icarus myth by students from around the world.

Photographer Lawrence Morgan invites teachers to work with their classes to write poems, stories, and imaginative interpretations based on the myth. "Original poetry should be inspired by the myth of Icarus, but rather than simply telling the story, take some aspect of the myth, a theme that strikes you, and express it through your own experience and feelings," suggests Morgan.

All contributions should be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed return envelopes and submitted to Lawrence Morgan, P.O. Box 641, Mill Valley, CA 94942. Morgan is also interested in linking up interested teachers to work together on the project over the Internet. Contact Lawrence Morgan at the address above for more details.

NCTE Promising Young Writers Program
(open to eighth-graders)

NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Program
(open to high school juniors)

The deadline for entering eighth-grade students in the NCTE Promising Young Writers Program is January 10. The deadline for entering high school juniors in the NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Program is January 23. Teachers who have previously entered either program will receive the brochure/nomination form automatically. Others should request the information from the NCTE Awards Office, 800-369-6283, ext. 221.

Call for Submissions to *NOTES Plus*

We welcome your descriptions of teaching practices for consideration for *NOTES Plus*. We ask that submissions be original and previously unpublished and, in the case of an adapted idea, that you clearly identify any sources that deserve mention.

We're hoping to see these sorts of details in your submission: goals and purposes, reflections on what occurred, effectiveness of the practice; and rationale for continued use of the practice.

Suggested maximum length is 750 words for "Ideas from the Classroom" and 1200 words for the more in-depth "Focus" columns. Include diagrams or student examples where appropriate.

Receipt of your submission will be acknowledged by postcard, but acknowledgement does not guarantee publication. We are unable to return manuscripts, so please keep a copy. We reserve the right to edit submissions to accommodate space limitations and format.

Send submissions to *NOTES Plus*, 1111 W. Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801 or e-mail to notesplus@ncte.org.

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"You've got to stop being so listless in class. I never heard of anyone getting an incomplete in conduct!"

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NOTES Plus

A Quarterly of Practical Teaching Ideas October 1998

In This Issue

Ideas from the Classroom

Crossing Boundaries

This issue of *NOTES Plus* brings together classroom ideas that cross traditional boundaries between disciplines. In the strategies collected here, students' reading, writing, and discussion touches on photography and point of view, varied responses to the Civil War; music and mood; music and revision; anthropology and science fiction; and the concept of heroism. Also included in this issue are several innovative methods for helping students to reflect and respond to their own work.

Exploring Point of View through Photographs

Students often think of photographs as truth. But in fact, many photographs are partially or totally staged, and photographs that are not staged still rely for their meaning and impact on the vantage point and motives of the photographer. Point of view can actually be just as important to the creation and understanding of a photograph as it is to a work of literature. With this in mind, I've developed the following assignment in which students expand their understanding of point of view through the examination of historical photographs in nonfiction literature.

Begin by selecting interesting photographs for students to examine. The best choices for this assignment seem to be black and white photographs that have some historical significance, such as 1930s Depression photos by Dorothea Lange, photos of the construction workers building the Golden Gate Bridge, 1950s photos advertising suburban utopias, and so on. One possible source for such photos is the photography section at the public library.

Place on the overhead one photograph, such as the well known Dorothea Lange shot of the weary farmwife holding a child. Distribute a list of starter questions such as those below, and ask the class to examine the photo and comment on it.

- Describe this picture.
- How does this picture make you feel? Does this picture have a mood?
- What elements or characteristics of this photograph contribute most to its impact?
- How has the photographer framed the subject? What do you see first in the picture? What leads your eye to the subject?
- Where was the photographer positioned when this photograph was taken? How far away was the subject? Is the photographer above, below, on a level with the subject? If the subject is a person or people, are they looking directly at the camera? What time of day was it? What is the light like?

- How do you think any of the above variables might affect the impact or meaning of the photograph? How do these variables contribute to the mood?

- Imagine that you are the photographer. Would you make any changes in how you set up this picturethat is, would you take it from the same distance from the subject, at the same height, at the same time of day, in the same lighting? Why or why not?

- What questions does this photograph make you want to ask?

- Does this photograph remind you of any modern scenes? If so, how is the scene in the photograph
- similar or different from that modern scene?

- If you had to sum up the photographer's point of view in this photograph, what would it be?

- (Assuming that the photograph has one or more human subjects:) How would you sum up the subject's point of view?

Some possible points of discussion might include whether Lange as a woman conveyed sympathy to the subject and whether this affected her expression and body pose; whether the photo would have a different impact if the subject were photographed from farther away or were part of a group of women and children; whether the photograph would be as effective if we saw the subject in profile instead of straight on, and so on. After the class has discussed the photograph, ask students to form pairs and select an interesting shot to analyze from a selection you provide. (This works out particularly nicely if the class has been studying nonfiction and you can provide photographs that comple ment the readings.)

Ask students to examine the photograph, review the starter questions, and begin brainstorming the point of view of the photographer toward the subject, and the point of view of the subject. Ask students to find visual details from the photograph to support points made. Then students are given the following writing assignment: *Write an essay supporting your claims regarding this photograph. You may choose to present one view* or two opposing views; you may choose to write an essay from the subject's point of view or from the photographer's point of view, or even to present both views.

An additional assignment could be to ask students to explain specifically how they would frame the shot differently to express other points of view.

To relate this assignment to the study of fiction, ask students to examine the point of view in one or more short stories that show strong elements of point of view. Students can then write an essay that first determines point of view and then gives examples from the text to support their claim.

Aimee V. Nichols, Charlotte, North Carolina

Voices from the Civil War: Collages that Capture Attitudes toward War

Most of the writing from the Civil War period is personal writing, such as diaries, letters, and journal entries, or public documents, such as speeches, orders, letters of resignation, and song lyrics. The wellknown literature of the Civil War did not appear until many years after the war was over. The American Literature text which my school uses *(Elements of Literature,* 5th Course; Holt, Rinehart, and Winston) offers a 15-page section of excerpts from various primary sources.

Rather than ask my students to read all 15 pages in one or two evenings-and come away with a jumble of ideas-I asked each student to read two pages. I randomly assigned students to the groups listed below. Each group's two-page reading assignment consists of a pair of selections. My intent is to demonstrate the variety of responses that people might have had to the Civil War (or to any war) and to prepare students for reading the literary responses of writers Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce.

Group 1: Responses of civilians (Mary Chestnut and Theodore Upson)

Group 2: Responses to battle (Walt Whitman and Major Sullivan Ballou)

Group 3: Formal, public responses (the Gettysburg Address and the Battle Hymn of the Republic)

Group 4: Responses of former slaves (Frederick Douglass and Susie King Taylor)

Group 5: Responses from soldiers in the camps (Josh Billings and Alexander Hunter)

Group 6: Responses to the end of the War (Mary Chestnut, Abraham Lincoln, Seth Flint, Robert E. Lee)

Students read their two pages in class. When they had finished I asked them to write down their reactions and impressions to any or all of the prompts listed below and then answer the two questions:

Prompts

- How does what you read make you feel?
- What surprised you?
- Did the reading change or reinforce any attitude you already had?
- What picture of war did the reading create for you?
- If what you read was all you knew about war, howwould you describe war to a child?
- Based on what you read, what would you say war is like?

Questions

1. Based only on what you read, sum up war in one word or phrase.
2. What color is war?

After students had finished writing, I gave this assignment for homework: Create a collage that reflects the view of war you developed based on the reading you did.

When students came to class the next day. I asked those in Group I to come to the front of the room and hold up the collages they had created. I made a list on the board of the words each student had chosen to sum up war, and the colors each had selected. Students taped their collages to the board around the list of words and colors. In the end there were six groupings on the boards and walls around the room.

What followed was one of the most thoughtful discussions of the year. Students noticed that the words in each group were similar in affect (e.g., from Group *2: helpless, worthless, depressing, horrid, perish, unbearable, painful)* and that the colors were also similar (e.g.. from Group 3: *red, white,* and *blue;* from Group 6: *gray, dark blue, dull blue, black).* Students realized that each group of writers reflected a very different perspective on the war and concluded that meaning depends upon experience. The students talked for the entire period and since I left the collages on the wall for several days, continued to discuss "war" for some time.

This lesson prepared us not only for Stephen Crane's use of color in his stories about the Civil War and for Ambrose Bierce's bitter irony, but also for stories of war from modern writers such as Tim O' Brien.

An effective follow-up reading to this assignment might be the poem "The Blind Men and the Elephant" by John Godfrey Saxe.

Sarah Powley McCutcheon High School, Lafayette, Indiana

Student Anthropologists Explore Science Fiction

I use the following assignment after students in my class have read and discussed Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" and Stephen Benet's "By the Waters of Babylon."

Through the following strategy, students have the experience of thinking and posing questions as anthropologists of the future and exploring the idea of the loss of knowledge hidden in the past. They also consider the literary elements of setting and mood and discuss common elements of science fiction.

A prereading guessing game sets up the idea of loss of prior knowledge-that as we have progressed as a society we have lost, or given up, some knowledge to gain or give priority to other knowledge. Once this idea is established, this becomes a very active reading lesson in which students or teams of students try to read the clues from the past in an attempt to understand what happened (apparent nuclear destruction) in the story "By the Waters of Babylon." By proceeding as anthropologists looking for clues (rather like scientists at Pompeii), students work to predict the setting and events that occurred before reading the resolution. Teams could even work together to chart and categorize clues.

In preparation for this assignment, I assemble a collection of antique and uncommon kitchen and household gadgets, which will be used to prompt thought and discussion. Among the items that could potentially be found at local flea markets or antique shops are a washboard, a bread-toasting "cage," iron tongs used to pick up blocks of ice, a coal scuttle, and so on. However, drawings or photos of such items could also be used in lieu of actual items, as long as the labels or descriptions are taken off before displaying them for students.

To begin the prereading exercise, I ask students to imagine that they are anthropologists and archaeologists seeking clues to understanding the past. I ask them if they realize that many museums hold household and farming tools whose uses are lost to us. I hold up antique and uncommon gadgets one at a time and ask students to write down their guesses as to the item's use and name. From their examination of the implements, what inferences would they draw about our civilization? After students share their speculations I tell them the purpose of each implement. (I don't recall the exact source of this guessing game, but I believe it may have come from a Prentice Hall Teacher's Edition.)

Next, I read aloud Psalm 137, from which Stephen Benet's story title is taken. As a class we discuss the text and make predictions about the themes and ideas that might be present in Benet's story.

As students begin the reading of Benet's story, I ask them to continue to think of themselves as anthropologists and to search for clues in the text with regard to clothing, tools, or geographical formations. Students can jot down their observations and predictions as they read, and after the reading, chart their findings to determine the time and place of the story.

After the reading, we discuss students' theories as to time and place as well as more general impressions and their thoughts about the tide in the story. I offer discussion prompts such as

What is Benet's warning?
Should we heed this message?
Do you agree with John, who says, "It is better to lose one's life than to lose one's spirit"?

Finally, we create a Venn Diagram as a class, comparing the two stories. In the center of the two overlapping circles of the diagram we note similarities such as the following:

Both deal with apparent self-destruction of a society that outsmarts itself.
Technology did not ensure society's survival.
Technology did not ensure happinesss.
Progress may have been too fast in both stories.
Nature continues to thrive without humankind.
Both authors can be seen as sounding warnings to humankind.

In the outer section of the left circle, we note characteristics unique to "By the Waters of Babylon":

John's ancestors survive.
John has primitive knowledge and can rediscover the secrets of technology.
People can read the ancient writings, rebuild, and learn from the past.

In the outer section of the right circle, we note characteristics unique to "There Will Come Soft Rains":

Only the house survives.
The house computer is the only thing processing information.
No second chance.Technology cannot adapt or save itself.

These discussions have been very effective for my students in getting them to think critically, make predictions, and compare ideas from their reading. I generally judge how much students' have gained by their insights into the stories and by their ideas for the Venn Diagram.

As a follow-up writing assignment, I ask students to write a journal entry on one item they would place in a time capsule and to explain why. I also ask them to answer the question, "What would future anthropologists learn about us from your choice?"

Karen Ballash, St. Augustine Academy Lakewood, Ohio

Understanding Revision through Music

In order to help students gain a better understanding of what revising really is, I use something most of them can relate to: rock music. I incorporate this mini-idea while I'm explaining the writing process. After I have finished introducing the idea of *drafting* and before we've talked much about *revising, I* play two different versions of the same song.

The song I like to use is Aerosmith's "Livin' on the Edge." Of course, other styles of music will work; however, I think students can relate better to rock music, and moreover, the availability of "demo" versions seems to be more prevalent in rock.

Basically, all you need is a CD player and two versions of the same song. To clarify, one version of the song needs to be a "demo," and the other version needs

to be the studio, or official release of the song. A demo version of a song can usually be found on CD singles of your favorite artist, and "demo version" usually appears in parenthesis after the title of the song. You will also find demo versions of songs on cassette tapes, but I use a CD simply because it is easier to cue the songs in the middle of a class.

I play the demo version of "Livin' on the Edge" first because that is what I call a rough draft of a song in writing terms: it's rough because the vocals are not polished, lyrics are often quite different, it usually has a sub-standard sound quality, and fewer instruments (i.e. just the basics to get the idea of the song and the essence of the music). That is really what a rough draft in writing is as well.

After the "demo" song is finished, I play the studio, or polished version without saying anything. When that version is finished, I simply ask students to point out some differences between the two songs. Some common responses have been: "Are the artists different?," "The first one sounds emptier; kinda cheap," and "He changed some lyrics."

Since I have consistently received good responses, I do not feel it is necessary to ask them specific questions until we actually begin discussing the differences in depth. The class discussion becomes a compare/contrast as students point out specific differences, which I write on the board. In general, most students come to an agreement that the demo version is rough, and doesn't sound as good as the polished version. They believe that the demo version is not ready to be put on the album; it still needs work.

After the discussion, I ask them to tell me what they think would come next in the writing process after drafting, and someone usually guesses something like "revising," "making changes," or "polishing."

I capitalize on this moment to tell students that re-*vising* their writing means more than spell-checking and comma-correcting, just as revising in music is more than just changing a word or two in the lyrics or adding an extra note or two on the piano.

Revising is a rethinking of major ideas, making existing ideas clearer, and even deleting extraneous information; likewise, revising in music could be deleting a entire verse to clarify the meaning of the song, or adding another guitar track to create a broader sound, or even deleting the keyboard because it sounds similar to the piano.

I conclude by emphasizing to students that *all* artists revise. Music is an art and so is writing. So if Aerosmith needs to revise their work, then so do you! This really hits home to many students.

I think this mini-idea is effective for two reasons: It helps students gain a better understanding of what is involved in writing, and it shows them that revising is a natural part of the artistic, creative process.

William Ebbesen, Gladstone, Michigan

The One-Question Interview

I can't remember where I found this classroom biography writing activity, but I've used it successfully over the years. It's the standard biography writing project with a bit of a twist.

First students form small groups and brainstorm 2040 interview questions that they are willing to ask and answer. Besides the standard *who, what, when* questions, students are often interested in asking and answering questions about dreams, "favorites" (songs, books, people, activities, places, possessions, memories, etc.), their most thrilling or disappointing moments, and so on.

Part One

I type each question on a separate piece of paper and make copies for all students participating in the activity. This sheet should also include the interviewer's name and the name of the person being interviewed.

Each student selects a question or two and the fun begins. Although it appears to be a free-for-all at first, the interaction is more focused than it looks. The student interviewers circulate around the room and ask all participants their question(s), using a separate sheet of paper for each response (and answering the question themselves as well).

The end result should be that each student has talked to every other participant at least once and faithfully recorded all the responses.

Next, the teacher sorts all of the sheets, grouping them according to the person interviewed. This results in a rough draft biography of each participant, and allows the teacher an opportunity to read and evaluate the responses.

Part Two

Using any selection method desired, the teacher gives each student all of the responses for one other person in the class. This collection of information becomes the basis for the biography.

Next comes the part I really like-students have to read each other's handwriting. This creates an atmosphere of "biographical research," as well as making a not-so-subtle point about the value of neatness.

Using the question/response sheets as a rough draft, students can begin constructing the biographies. Even the most hesitant writers have enough information to begin, and students have the experience of organizing information, since questions are on separate sheets and can be easily shuffled in any order desired.

The time spent on developing and polishing biographies can be shortened or expanded as needed. My students usually want to write a piece which can be "published," accompanied by pictures and added information. Some classes go the extra step and make a class book or another form of public display.

I find this to be a great beginning-of-semester activity. Students are given the opportunity to talk to each other; everyone has equal opportunity to listen and speak; the activity inspires group collaboration; and the teacher is in the role of guide, not boss. This assignment becomes the goalpost for other writing projects, as it includes these useful steps: brainstorming, interaction, rough drafts, responding, and final products. Even resistant writers feel less threatened and all students end up with a product to be proud of.

Debby Drong-Bjork, Howard Luke Alternative High School, Fairbanks, Alaska

Maximum Writing, Minimum Frustration

When I discovered that I didn't have to limit my writing assignments to the number of papers I could read, I found a new day. Research supports the thesis that student papers improve more from many writings and revisions, not from copious marks and responses from me. With these thoughts in mind, I now assign more writing and use the following classroom management ideas to help give my students every writing opportunity possible.

Unfortunately, I'm not able to give proper credit for these ideas; I've collected them from a number of sources, including journal articles, various books, and my colleagues.

Suggestions for Maximizing Writing and Minimizing Frustration

1. Use reading assistants (parents if possible).

2. Assign shorter papers and challenge students to see how much insight they can deliver in 200 cogent words.

3. Assign written work to be done in journal form throughout the semester, then carefully read sample pages, rather than every page, of the collected journals.

4. Assign journals, then collect and grade one-third of the class's work at a time.

5. Assign three or four short essays, to be written in journals. Collect the journals mid-way through the semester and check (not evaluate), or have a reader check, to see that the essays are being written. (Only a check or minus grade is recorded.) Several weeks before semester's end, the student selects what he or she considers he one best piece of writing, polishes it, and submits it for a grade. The students thus have considerable writing experience, but the teacher evaluates only one set of papers.

6. Help to establish peer-tutoring groups in the classroom. Students turning in unacceptable work can then be asked to revise papers under the direction of a tutor and resubmit for your final evaluation.

7. Devise a form checklist, tailored to your own needs, to attach to a paper, indicating its strengths and weaknesses. (The checklist substitutes for extensive written comments, but a brief summary statement is still appreciated by students.)

8. Decide on three or four key elements of writing that you want to stress during the semester; explain these to students at the onset; and then focus primarily on these elements in your comments on papers. (For instance: you might stress organization, evidence of examples, and logic.)

9. Choose one element of writing to emphasize on a particular assignment; read for and comment on that element alone. (A second assignment might have a different emphasis-or the same one.)

10. Closely read and mark one page of a longer paper. Then rapidly read the other pages with no marking, and add a brief summary comment at the end.

11. Read all the papers on a given assignment but write no comments or grades on any; select one or two with special strengths that you want to talk about and one or two with weaknesses or common mistakes that you want to comment on. *Without identifying the writers in any way,* comment on these points in class; then return all the papers for revision and resubmission. (The students thus have two writing experiences, in particular the valuable one of revision, but you write evaluations on only one set of papers and can, in effect, speed-read the other set.)
Everyone writes; half are collected by the teacher to read. For the next assignment, the other half of the class turn their papers in.

Raphael Jostoneaux, Jr, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

Mood Music

When I first approached my students with the element of mood in writing, I discussed it with them, gave them examples, and then let them practice writing to reflect mood. I found most of my students focusing on "sad" and "happy." In thinking of how to enrich this exploration of mood, I began thinking about all of the different types of music we listen to when we are in certain moods. In addition, I thought about how drawings and pictures evoke different moods. That's how I came up with this roundabout way to teach the element of mood in writing. It has worked wonders with my students.

The first thing you need to do is obtain a cassette tape and record three distinctly different kinds of music. I use classical, new wave (soothing), and a rock song which is popular at the time. The songs must be fairly long (try for 4-5 minutes) and try to steer clear of music with lyrics (or at least lyrics which can actually be understood) so the student's moods won't be influenced by the words.

1. Hand out three pieces of drawing or typing paper to each student.

2. While doing this, talk to the kids about moods. I usually ask my teenagers what kind of music they listen to when they've just had a fight with their parents and they've gone into their bedroom and slammed the door. Or maybe when they just get off the phone with their boyfriend or girlfriend.

3. Have them label the paper "A", "B", and "C" in the top right hand corner, then shuffle the papers so that they are in any order they choose.

4. Explain to them that they will be listening to three distinctly different types of music, each of which will evoke a different mood from them. They are to depict that mood in a drawing while they are listening to the music.

5. After the students are totally silent with pencils in hand, begin to play the first piece. While you're circulating, stick three pieces of tape on the edge of each student's desk (these will be used later). Stop the tape after each piece of music so they can finish their drawing and get ready for the next one.

6. After the final piece of music, have the students put their drawings in A, B, C order and stick them on their desks with the tape. With blank paper in hand, let them get up and wander around to the desks of other students. Have them guess what type of music each person was listening to when he/she drew each picture and record their guesses on paper.

7. Share some of the guesses. This is usually fun!

8. Have them write a creative piece based on one of their pictures. The writing should reflect the mood of the drawing.

9. Break the students into groups of three or four. Have them read each other's writing and let them guess on which picture the writing is based.

A lot of good things came out of this lesson. Besides learning the element of mood, students were involved in a multitude of activities-listening, drawing, writing, and sharing-all in one or two class periods. This lesson also allows hidden artists in the class to shine for a day, and can be modified for virtually any grade level.

Cathy Schluessher, Mariner High School, Cape Coral, Florida

The Reduction: An Organizational Tool that Aids Critical Thinking

Reading, discussing, and writing are all valuable ways to gain insight into a work of literature. In addition, I'd like to suggest an organizational tool that can help students to interact with the work in a personal way, to gain a

deeper understanding, and to see relationships and patterns in the work.

This tool, which I call a *reduction* (as in the *reduced* or *distilled* essence of a work), is a document individually created by each student after a reading, including the information that the student determines is needed to fully understand the work. At its simplest, a reduction can be thought of as a personalized group of lists of important facts and insights about a reading.

A reduction is created on a single horizontal sheet of 8 ½" x 11" paper, and since individual selection is the key to the final product, no two reductions are alike. Students may organize information on the page in whatever way makes sense to them. Dashes, bullets, arrows, boxes, brackets, underlining, and shading are all common ways to highlight items and make connections. The format is creative and self-determined, but for each student, the process of choosing the dements is enriched by many sources,including reading, class discussion, comparing notes, writing, and conferring in pairs and small groups.

At the high school level, students have ordinarily studied elements and techniques of literary works, so that such terms as *plot, symbolism,* and *foreshadowing* become pertinent entries on their reduction sheets. What the student selects to include becomes the organizational link to critical thinking, enabling students to anchor their thoughts and discoveries about the work in a meaningful way.

Student testimony each year provides a litany of positive feedback on this process:

> I could see the play as a whole picture instead of bits and pieces.
>
> It helped me see patterns.
>
> It helped me give evidence in my essay.
>
> Having a limited amount of space forced me to focus on the main ideas. By rewriting my notes into the reduction, I began to remember a lot more. Reductions helped teach me the steps of organized writing.

I introduce students to the reduction by explaining that it is a way to condense and organize important information and thoughts about a story, novel, or play. The reduction will help them to make sense of the work and also to remember more about it.

I tell students that we won't be creating our reduction sheets until after we've finished the reading, but that students may want to keep track during study and discussion of important details or observations that they want to include in their reductions. For example, these might include a phrase that suggests foreshadowing; a note about an object that seems to be symbolic; a list of adjectives frequently used to describe a certain character; an observation about the setting; a quotation from a character that seems crucial to understanding the character's motivations; and so on. Any details that seem important to understanding the work are appropriate.

To illustrate, after we read *Macbeth, I* ask students to space the five acts horizontally on a sheet of paper. The emphasis on keeping the information to one page helps students to perceive the play as a whole rather than as five separate acts and to follow patterns and relationships throughout the work.

To begin the process, we briefly brainstorm important elements and ideas as a class and jot them on the chalkboard. At this point, prompts and questions can help students to think in broad terms about the characters, themes, and main issues of the work. With *Macbeth, I* have used such prompts as: What is the theme of the play and how does Shakespeare state it in various ways throughout the play? Where does blood and water imagery appear in the play, and what are its implications? How does Shakespeare lure his audience into the play? Is it dramatically justifiable that Lady Macbeth commit suicide in Act. V?

Once ideas are flowing, I ask students to start on individual reductions in class and complete them as homework. When they bring in their completed sheets, we create a class reduction. With five volunteers at the board, each shares an act from his or her reduction. Discussion becomes lively as everyone searches and checks to make sure that no pertinent information is lacking.

The format for the reduction is a very individual decision. Some of my students have organized notes by acts or chapters, traced patterns or paths throughout the book, and made charts with areas for themes. The student sample shown on the next page is a reduction created for Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon.* This student's reduction includes a graphic representation (at top) of other characters' relationships to Milkman, notes from class discussion on the significance of flying, a family tree, and comments on such topics as theme and names in the novel.

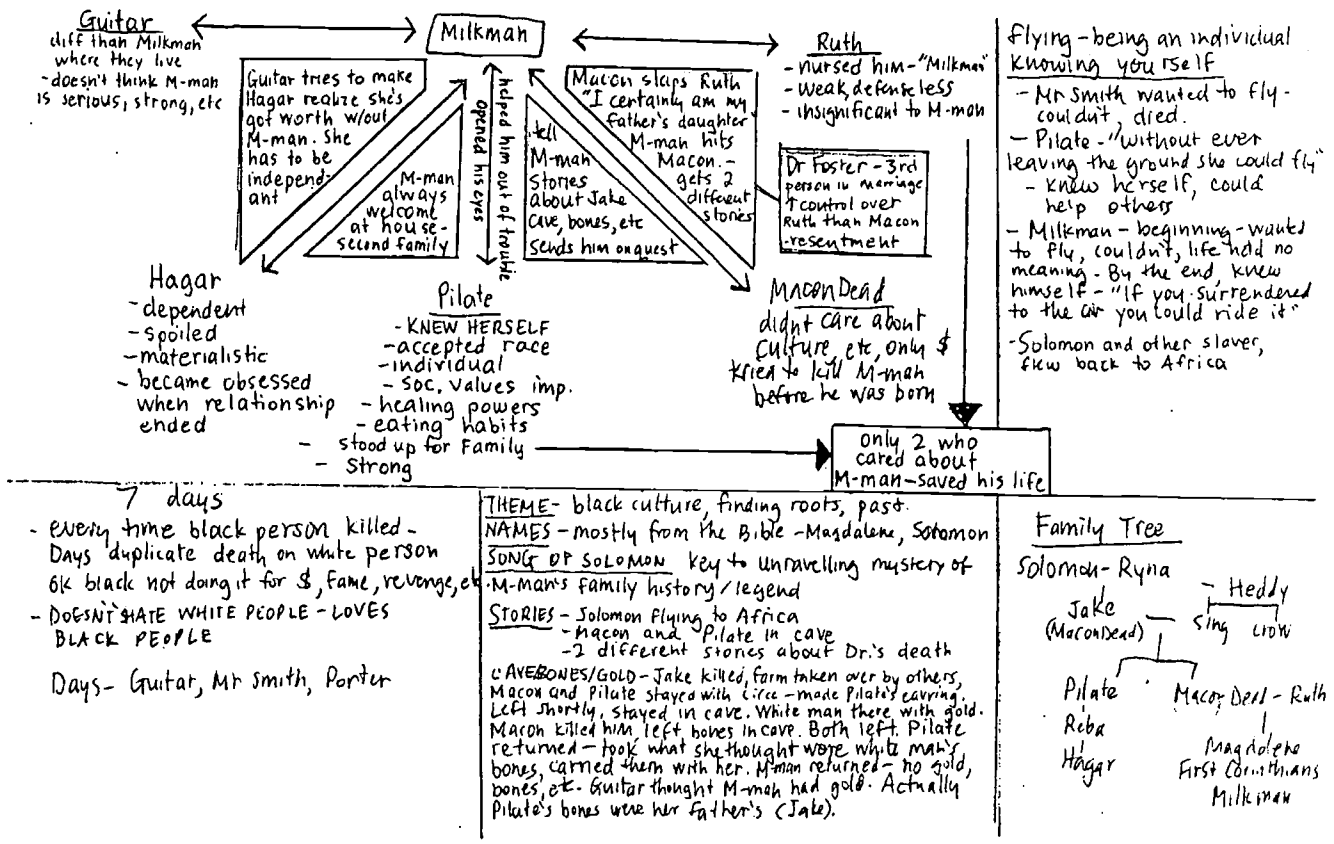
The reduction is obviously not meant to represent all that students know about the work. Each item is meant to be a link, a spark that elicits a further chain of thought. Sharing interpretations with the class on transparencies

usually results in a striking discovery: How can a single work be internalized so differently by so many?

The reduction can be a vital part of making students active learners. Instead of being told what they need to know, students explore and evaluate the material for themselves. In helping students synthesize all the elements of a work, the reduction also provides a useful preparation tool for writing assignments and exams.

Mary Jane Reed, Solon High School, Solon, Ohio

Sample Student Reduction for *Song of Solomon*



Rendering a Text

Many teachers occasionally get the feeling that their students just aren't comprehending what they're reading. But do any of us understand everything we read the first time? I have found the following techniques for processing or *rendering* the text to be very helpful in increasing reading comprehension. *Rendering* has ten meanings according to the *Scott Foresman Advanced Dictionary,* but the one I would like to focus on is the "removal of fat"-in this case, removing the "fat," or what is unnecessary, from a piece of writing and leaving the essence or main ideas of the piece.

Read-Around: One of the best and quickest ways to review a passage that students have read is to ask them to look through the piece again and pick out the words, phrases, or sentences that stand out, sound important, or somehow resonate for them.

We model our relaxed and low-pressure read-around on the sharing method used in meetings of Quaker Friends: no one is called upon, but all are free to speak up with pertinent contributions "as they are led." Students are asked to be courteous to one another so that all contributions can be heard. A student or the teacher can start, and the others may say their words or phrases as they feel it is appropriate.

What does this accomplish? Students have reviewed the reading, have picked out examples of good writing, and have had their choices validated and learned what elements resonated with other readers.

Post-it Notes: Many readers write in the margins of their books when they want to remember a particularly strong point, ask a question, follow up on an idea or suggestion in the text, or look up an unfamiliar word or phrase.

Writing in the margins is a way of processing or *rendering* the material the reader is picking out and noting just what is most important to him or her at the time. In schools, however, our students do not have the option of writing in the margins of their text books. What to do?

One solution is to provide students with a supply of small self-sticking notes and ask them to keep a few in hand as they read. Students write questions, ideas, disagreements, words to look up, phrases they like the sound of, symbols, names,-anything they want-on the notes and stick them in the margin as they read.

Following the reading, ask students to compare their notes with a partner and explain why they made the notes they did. In the course of this exercise students individually process what they read, make personal responses, and talk with others about what each thought was important.

Dramatizing the text: Drama can be a great way for students to *render* a text and make it their own. In this exercise, groups of students are given different passages to read. The teacher explains that the groups have a specified amount of class time to create a dramatic group presentation showing that they understand the essence of the passage. Students are encouraged to be imaginative and use any talents and methods available to them to convey the essence of the passage. A skit and a pantomime using a narrator are just two of the possible formats students might use.

Students design and practice their presentations, and then the groups present their performances for the class. This activity is especially effective with poetry, short stories, and scenes from history, but can also work well with subject matter from other disciplines-for instance, as in asking students to illustrate a concept such as osmosis or mitosis.

This exercise involves students in rereading a passage to be certain of the meaning; in creative thinking in finding ways to convey that meaning; and in working collaboratively to develop narration, dialogues, movements, and gestures to present to the class.

All of these methods for rendering texts can be especially effective with difficult reading material. Students will benefit from the extra investment in reading, picking out important passages, and comparing their responses to the text.

Bunny Mogilnicki, Department of Defense Dependent Schools, APO AP

Reflection Journals

We learn by doing; we grow through reflecting on our successes as well as our failures.

I teach a one semester Public Speaking elective. One of the most valuable experiences my students have had is something I refer to as their *reflection.* It's similar to a portfolio of speaking experiences.

Class time is set aside after each speech for questions and audience reaction. Compliments come first, followed by specific suggestions for improvement.

Written evaluation sheets are also completed by both classmates and teacher. We practice filling out these sheets together, and students learn how to do it in such a way that we know we are helping each other.

Finally, students are asked to record their personal impressions of the activity in a "reflection journal."

The first page of each reflection journal lists the student's personal goals for the course. We brainstorm possibilities so that students start out with some ideas.

Then after each major speech students are asked to spend some time reflecting on their performance, in writing, in a special notebook kept just for this purpose.

Students include the written evaluations they receive during class as well as name, date, type of speech, and topic. I suggest students think in terms of the following prompts:

> Describe the speech.
>
> Describe your process.
>
> How did it go? What did you do right? What needed "fixing"?
>
> What did you learn from the experience? What are you going to do differently next time?

After students have completed reflections on an introductory speech, a demonstration speech, an informative speech, a persuasive speech, a video-taped pet-peeve speech, a reading activity at our elementary school, and a final speech, they reread their reflections and write a self-evaluation, which I call "Reflection on the Reflections."

This self-evaluation takes the form of a letter to me, the teacher, that includes answers to the following:

1. What was your best speech and why?
2. What was your weakest speech and why?
3. What aspect of speaking do you most enjoy?
4. What aspect of speaking gives you the most difficulty?
5. How successfully have you fulfilled your personal goals for this course? (Be specific.)

I am constantly fine-tuning this, requesting more specif ic information each time. I recently began asking students to mention specific speeches, which helps them to include more pertinent observations.

Barbara Lutkenhaus, Somers High School, Lincolndale, New York

Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback

This classroom writing exercise is a hybrid of an activity taken from Geoffrey Platt's *A Writer's Journey. I* have changed the focus in order to emphasize the giving and receiving of constructive feedback.

I find success using this fun, nonthreatening writing exercise about the second or third week of the semester because it functions well as a writing-workshop ice-breaker. Though I use this exercise at the community college level, I'm sure it will be effective with students at many levels.

My objectives for this exercise are that students practice descriptive writing, read descriptive pieces to a small-group audience, receive and record constructive feedback from a small-group audience, listen to other students read their descriptive pieces, and provide constructive feedback to other students' writing.

The materials required are photographs mounted on poster board-a separate and different photograph for each student in the class. I use photographs from *National Geographic* magazine. It contains a rich variety of subjects, and the quality of the photographs enhances the students' interest in the assignment.

Even though I use this activity near the beginning of the semester, there are several prerequisites. First, the students must have a working knowledge of freewriting, which we begin practicing the very first day of the semester. (Peter Elbow and Ira Shor offer sound advice for implementing this activity.)

Second, students need a general overview of the writing process, including what types of feedback, revision, and editing are more appropriate at each stage of the process.

Third, the students should recognize the necessity for descriptive details when developing support for their ideas. We do some preliminary reading that exemplifies how writers relay pictures, images, impressions, and ideas through concrete, detailed descriptions.

I have used this same exercise later in the semester, sometimes focusing more on organization, or some other aspect of writing. It is also an exercise easily adapted to writers of varying ages and abilities.

I model the activity for the entire class first, then the students follow the procedure in small groups.

Everyone receives a different, unlabeled photograph, mounted on poster board. To pique interest, I tell the

students that I know the precise setting of each photograph, and I will share that information at the end of class. The students are not to show anyone else their photographs.

We all begin writing, describing our particular photograph with as much detail as possible. (While this is not exactly a freewriting exercise, the approach should be the same: writing without stopping, and without worrying about sentence skills, organization, and so on.) The emphasis should be on capturing the photograph's images, setting, mood, and tone by including detail. No identification of setting should be made. Any such impressions and observations should be relayed exclusively through the use of descriptive detail.

After writing for fifteen minutes, we cover our pictures, and I read my piece to the class. When finished, I give students a few moments to visualize the images, and then I solicit guesses about the setting, which I record directly onto my paper.

Next, I show my photograph to the class. As theyabsorb the images, I ask the students to compliment me on the visual images I was able to capture in my written description, and record these compliments. It's important students learn how to reinforce effective writing by giving- and receiving-such feedback.) Now I ask students to point out important elements in the picture that I left out, or that I described in a way that didn't fit their perceptions. Again, I record the comments.

A short class discussion is appropriate at this juncture. The students need to understand that I do not have a finished piece of writing. Instead, I have a starting draft, and thanks to them, loads of ideas that I may or may not want to consider when attempting a second draft. I am simply exploring possibilities for further development. (Too often, students believe feedback is limited to "corrections" from the instructor. I'm initiating a weaning process here.)

At this point I tell them the actual setting of my picture, and their guesses indicate how effective my first draft was at capturing the essence of the photograph.

The students repeat the above procedure in small groups. I monitor-listening, encouraging, and reminding students to *record* comments, a skill they often undervalue. As groups finish, I reveal the settings. I encourage more discussion, such as which details help relay the setting, which details may be misleading. The students remain fully engaged, comfortably talking and exchanging ideas-improving their ability to give and receive feedback without even realizing it.

Everyone approaches topics and issues from different perspectives just as with looking at a picture. Students need to explore these differences during the writing process; it's a way of developing their material. The interaction practiced in this exercise-the sharing of perspectives- becomes our model for working on papers throughout the semester.

Bruce Cray, Nicolet Area Technical College, Rhinelander, Wisconsin

Waterfall of Words

The "Waterfall of Words" is a good way to sensitize students to the sound of well written prose or poetry, or to loosen students up for oral performances. The source for this idea was a workshop presented by Jenny Krugman of Florida.

Begin by reading aloud the poem or short selection of prose you wish to use. Have students mark a word, phrase, or passage that appeals to them or that speaks strongly to them.

Then tell students that you will begin moving from desk to desk, and as you approach each student, you want that student to begin reading aloud what they have marked and to continue reading until you indicate to stop. (A bell or large wave of the arms works well as an end signal.)

Ask students to read at a comfortable volume and speed, but not to try to drown out other students. Since students will be speaking for two or three minutes, they should take time to focus on the sounds, rhythm, and flow of what they are reading. Reassure students that repetition is fine, since some of them are likely to mark the same items.

As you move around the room, motioning to each student in turn to begin, you and your students will find yourselves awash in a waterfall of words. After a minute or two, use the end signal, and listen to the waterfall of words trickle off.

I find that this activity is a good warm-up to reading poetry. It helps students feel less intimidated by reading aloud, and encourages them to use their voices more effectively and actively listen to what they're reading. Even the shyest student will speak out loudly and confidently when reading such a short passage.

This exercise also helps the class focus on the "heart" of a story, poem, or essay under discussion, since invariably several students will choose key passages from work to read aloud, and the importance of a particular

word or passage tends to be emphasized by the repetition heard during the activity.

Beverly J. Jackson, Columbia, South Carolina

Their Own Voices, Their Own Choices

As the semester of American Literature waned, after full weeks of thematic, response-based activities and class discussions, I looked for a final project to assess the students' progress in the class. I wanted to see what they had learned, and I wanted them to have the continued freedom to evaluate, challenge, explain, and react to the literature.

I set up the following situation as the framework: in an essay assignment, the student would assume the role of literature teacher, and, for the sake of suggested limitation, they would be allowed ten to twelve elements or ideas to include in a description of their own American Literature "curriculum" (although many asked to include more, and I gladly agreed).

I encouraged students to suggest new ideas and approaches for exploring the concepts they had decided to "teach." As for the content, students could choose to include whatever they wished, but the idea was to address significant issues that would be necessary to understand an author or literary era.

As I read the resulting papers, during an already hectic and busy end to the semester, I found myself reading parts of them aloud to my wife and my colleagues. Students covered authors, themes, literary works, and some of the "isms"-major literary movements-that we had discussed as background, and they made comparisons and contrasts with authors and works that we had not even studied in class.

A number of students chose difficult selections like "Bartleby the Scrivener," with class activities focusing on alienation and its modern impacts. One suggested a short unit comparing Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King, even providing a response-based quiz his "students" could take. Others described a literary clash between the Romantics and the Realists, setting up mock debates peopled by representative authors.

Many students said that they felt comfortable with the way our class had been set up and cited reading and discussion activities that they would continue in their own "classes." Many offered cogent additions or alternatives.

Even though I read the papers at a very busy time, I thoroughly enjoyed each one, for I saw that the students had indeed learned something, that they had made many personal connections to the ideas we had read and studied, and that they had comfortably and creatively established ownership of the literature.

I remember one student's comments in particular:

> Three weeks ago, if someone had asked me who Wil-
> liam Faulkner was, I would have said maybe someone on "All My Children." After reading several of his stories, especially "A Rose for Emily," I was astounded. The man is a master storyteller, and I would definitely include him in my semester course of American Literature.

Stephen Fisher, Wausau West High School, Wausau, Wisconsin

Focus across the Disciplines

In Search of Ordinary Heroes: A Project Inspired by Miep Gies

As a child I read the *Diary ofAnne Frank,* and although there was much in it to sadden me, I was buoyed by the fact that in the midst of the heinous actions recounted, individuals who refused to collaborate with these inhuman activities were cited.

Their presence gave me hope as a child that good people-ordinary heroes-existed. As an adult years later, I was touched when Miep Gies who had helped hide the Frank family published a memoir titled *Anne*

Frank Remembered (1987). The prologue of this gripping intimate perspective included this self appraisal by Miep: "I am not a hero. I stand at the end of the long, long line of good Dutch people who did what I did or more . . . There is nothing special about me. I have never wanted special attention." (p. 11).

After reading Gies's book, I began to think of how I could use her work to engage my *90's* inner-city middle school students in a study of ordinary heroes. I had noticed an emphasis in the media on "glitzy heroes" of today, including sports figures, multimillionaire businessmen, music and film stars, and even on the celebrated "anti-heroes" such as O.J. Simpson and Joey Buttafocco. I decided to use Miep's thoughts on heroism and what it meant to her as a jumping-off point for a student search of unheralded, contemporary, "ordinary heroes."

To start the students on their own inquiries, I distributed copies of the list of quotes from Gies's book shown below. The quotes were presented intact initially so that the students (some of whom had read Anne's diary) would focus only on the remarks about heroism.

Ordinary Hero Quote Resource Sheet

Quotes from Miep Gies, *Anne Frank Remembered* (Simon and Schuster, *1987)*

(p. 11) "I am not a hero. I stand at the end of the long long line of good Dutch people who did what I did or moremuch more-during those dark and terrible times years ago, but always like yesterday in the hearts of those of us who bear witness. Never a day goes by that I do not think of what happened then."

"I willingly did what I could to help. My husband did as well. It was not enough."

"There is nothing special about me. I have never wanted special attention. I was only willing to do what was asked of me and what seemed necessary at the time."

(p. 12) "My story is a story of very ordinary people during extraordinary terrible times. Times the like of which I hope with all my heart, *will* never, never come again. It is for all of us ordinary people all over the world to see to it that they do not."

(p. 16) "Dutch children..... learned faithfulness in friendship very young."

(p. 29) "In Amsterdam, they [the Jews] were so much a part of the fabric of city life there was nothing unusual about them. It was simply unjust for Hitler to make special laws about them."

(p. 67) "In The Hague, not thirty five miles from Amsterdam, signs were appearing on park benches and in public places saying *Not for Jews* and *Jews Not Wanted*

Here. Could such a thing be true in the Netherlands?" (p. 80) "To hurt defenseless children was even worse." (p. 87) "Many Dutch Christians, deeply rankled by this humiliation of our Jews, also wore yellow stars on their coats .... Signs appeared in some shops asking Christians to show special respect for our Jewish neighbors . . . anything to show them that they were not alone."

(p. 90) "Our Dutch heritage, prohibiting the making of differences between people, had been violated, worst of all, our children's minds were being poisoned."

(p. 107) "Ten Christian Churches in Holland had banded together and issued a public protest .... [They] expressed profound 'outrage' at the German deportations of Jewish people."

The students were divided into teams of three students each. They were asked to "react" to the quotes and also to come up with their own definitions of the terms: "hero" and "ordinary hero." After some time to reflect, students offered the following definitions of "hero":

someone who does a brave or good act someone who helps a stranger someone who does not expect a reward someone who is selfless someone who has a positive effect on someone else's life

The student teams felt that an "ordinary hero" could be defined as follows:

Anyone can be an ordinary hero if he/she affects another person. The act itself can be heroic and the person can still be a hero if it fails.

A person who bounces back after a tragedy in his/ her life.

A person who fights causes for common people.

Someone who on the spur of the moment does something heroic.

Someone who is willing to help someone else even if he/she might lose his/her life.

I asked the students how they reacted to the quotes. Did they agree or disagree? What statements or phrases affected them the most?

Although none of my students saw themselves as ordinary heroes, several said they knew some ordinary heroes. In responding to quotes by Gies, my students made the following comments:

"I willingly did what I could to help .... It was not enough." (Gies)

"My mother tried to save her sister's life. But by the time she got her into the hospital, it was too late, the cancer was too far gone."

"My cousin kept a woman whose husband was beating up on her in her apartment overnight. But the woman went back to her husband the next day. He still be beating up on her."

"There is nothing special about me. I have never wanted special attention." (Gies)

"My friend saved his aunt whose hands had been burned when she put the oven on wrong. He just pulled her back, ran to the freezer, got ice, put her hands in the sink and called an ambulance. I only found out a week later when I asked her why her hands were bandaged. Philip made me promise I'd never tell anyone. He said he didn't know why he did what he did anyway. He just did it.

"To hurt a defenseless child was even worse." (Gies)

I think that the guidance counselors and the advocates who help battered children are heroes every day, though they don't get respect. Defenseless hurt children are rarely in the news unless they get kill or thrown in the garbage. The kids who get it each day but keep on going, don't get written up in the newspaper. The counselors who look out for them, don't get honored either.

Once the students had discussed their own concepts of ordinary heroes and reacted to Miep Gies's comments, I asked them if they felt that ordinary heroes were covered in the newspaper. Most of the students couldn't cite any ordinary heroes by name. But they did recall occasionally reading about firemen or police heroes.

The students were given three days for a newspaper based inquiry into ordinary heroes. They were encouraged to use not only daily general newspapers but also to examine their specific neighborhood and community newspapers. Foreign language newspapers such as *El Diario* were also included in the investigation.

When the students shared the results of their individual inquiries, one of the common comments was, "There was so little on ordinary heroes." Several students noted that ordinary hero stories were never found in the front pages of the general newspapers, but usually started later, on page six or seven.

Among the ordinary heroes who were identified in the initial search were:

Single women of the 90's, never married and are mothers

Hospital chaplain who raises money to pay bills of people with AIDS

An off-duty cop who rescued a family in a car crash

Two brothers who are hero firemen

Hospital volunteers

Argentinian rescuers who freed a man buried under the rubble of a terrorist bomb site

A teen law advocacy program for students in Soho

"Angel of Mercy"- a woman who saved a person from a car crash

A little league coach who tries to instill values in team

Lt. George Hener-a fireman who died as a result of a fire set by an arsonist

The medics and children in Rwanda

Emergency Medical Service workers

For each hero identified, the student researchers explained why they believed this individual fit the definition of ordinary hero.

In addition, one student wrote a general letter to the editor, which he sent to three daily newspapers, advocating more coverage of ordinary heroes and suggesting sources for finding these heroes (including schools, fire stations, hospitals, senior centers, and police stations).

Another student suggested starting our own "Ordinary Hero Hall of Fame." This idea intrigued other students, who organized a team of self-nominated "ordinary hero" researchers. This team issued a call for "Ordinary Hero Hall of Fame" nominations (see below), including a request for rationale as to why this person deserved a nomination, a citation including some personal data, and a photo of the individual.

Calling All Ordinary Heroes (or those who know them)

Do you know someone who does good without expecting a reward?

Do you know someone who has overcome tragedies, illness or difficulties without being acknowledged for it?

Do you know someone who volunteers time or helps out on a regular basis, but has never been publicized?

Do you know someone who is an unsung *Ordinary Hero?*

If so, write down your nominee's home address and *explain* in up to 250 words, why your nominee deserves to be inducted in our *Ordinary Hero Hall of Fame.*

Include a black-and-white photo of your nominee, preferably "doing" his/her ordinary hero" activity.

Submit by_____ (deadline) to: *The Ordinary Hero Hall of Fame Team.*

As sources for suggestions and nominations, the "Ordinary Hero Hall of Fame" team suggested that students use their own families, neighbors, community centers, community newspapers, police precincts, hospitals, volunteer centers, the daily newspapers, foreign language newspapers, and neighborhood papers/bulletins.

Although not required, it was suggested that students nominate individuals for the "Ordinary Hero Hall of Fame" they knew or had met with personally.

Within a month's time, "Ordinary Hero Hall of Fame" nominations were submitted. Among the nominees were family members who had survived cancer, a man who had volunteered his services at a neighborhood senior center, a decorated Korean War veteran, a woman who delivered hot meals to AIDS shut-ins, a mother who had gotten divorced from her abusive violent husband and made a life for her children and a teenager who was undergoing chemotherapy.

For each of these nominees who were elected to the Hall by acclamation, a display of photos, quotes, and other items were created. Each nominee came to school or was visited at home (or at the volunteer site/hospital) by a team of students from our newly created Hall. The student visitors were *not* the same students who had nominated the group.

Finally an induction ceremony was held which some of the inductees attended as well as three classes of 7th graders and representatives from the civic organizations involved.

The inductees who attended were genuinely touched. As several students noted, some of their remarks echoes the quotes from Miep Gies (which were distributed at the ceremony) which had begun our quest. The students seemed inspired by not only the inductees, but also by the range of achievable but ordinary activities they were involved in.

At the ceremony we began discussing ways in which some of our students could volunteer at a local senior center on the weekend. In addition, many students who had not responded to the first call for Inductees asked if we could have another ceremony later on, since they had thought of someone they wanted to nominate.

This community outreach endeavor is a great way to excite and engage students in finding and celebrating ordinary civic heroics: a most worthy endeavor.

Rose Reissman, Community School District #1, Brooklyn, New York

NOTES Plus

A Quarterly of Practical Teaching Ideas January 1999

Ideas from the Classroom

The Subject Students Know Best

Reading the News as a Responsible Citizen

In today's world the daily news coverage can be expected to include airplane crashes, hostage situations, flood destruction, terrorist attacks, and other frightening and frustrating events. A concerned citizen who wants to be informed of current events runs the risk of being overwhelmed by the onslaught.

I have used the following newspaper reading and discussion activity to help my 7th-graders develop healthy ways of responding to the news. This activity models critical thinking and brainstorming that can help put students on the path to becoming proactive, informed citizens. This activity could be expanded to include radio, television, and internet news, but for simplicity's sake I have used newspapers.

I began by bringing a large collection of recent, daily newspapers into the classroom and asking my students to divide into teams of two to three students each. I distributed scissors to each team and asked students to look over the newspapers and to cut out reports of events, trends, people, or groups in two categories: those they approved of, admired, felt positive about; and those that bothered them, that they mistrusted, or that they felt threatened by.

One student from each team was designated as the "clipping" coordinator. Another student was asked to record short notes about the events, trends, people, or groups that the team admired or were disturbed by. The student teams had 15 to 20 minutes for this independent news reading.

After the student teams had sufficient time to develop their lists, they shared their responses with the whole class. As each team presented the teams' views, group discussion was encouraged. However I purposely refrained from comment. This was my students' chance to articulate their views as citizens.

Among the items which "bothered" my seventh graders were the smuggling of illegal aliens; the death of 40 people in a fire caused by arson; the prolonged custody battle over a two-year-old girl originally given up for adoption by her biological mother; the use of steroids by athletes; the asbestos threat in a city elementary school; the way the Cuban government had foiled the escape of some citizens; and the tragedy of communities destroyed by flooding.

Among the people and events which students admired or felt good about were the work of Habitat for Humanity; the selection of Tansu Cillen as the first woman Prime Minister of Turkey; Jean Bertrand Aristide; Nelson Mandella; and efforts by the environmental group The Nature Conservancy.

Next we met in class discussion of all these items. We talked about why students had selected each item and about the strong emotions elicited by news coverage, especially when that coverage includes vivid descriptions and photographs. We also discussed the fact that many people can become overwhelmed and "turned off" in the face of information overload. We all agreed that people need to be sensitive to what their limits are and how they can respond in healthy ways to the constant barrage of current events coverage in the media.

I then asked students to brainstorm specific ideas for responding to the items they had listed; some typical student comments were:

> "There should be laws that prevent biological mothers from getting their children back after a year."

"The government should assist smuggled aliens and not deport them."

"Students should be allowed to help Habitat for Humanity."

"Students can collect canned food and clothes to send to flood victims."

From specific comments about the items in recent news, we moved into a more general brainstorming session about ways to respond to the news. I asked students to consider both ways to help yourself cope and ways to affect and improve the situation.

Within a few minutes, we had a long varied list of possible responses to items in the news:

writing journal entries, poetry, or stories inspired by a person or event in the news;

writing a letter or article for a newspaper, magazine, or school publication;

writing a letter directly to the person or people in the news;

talking about the news event with friends, family, or community members;

starting an informal "citizens' group";

holding a bake sale, car wash, or other fundraising effort in support of a worthy cause or event in the news;

creating posters, banners, or T-shirts to help publicize an event or worthy cause;

seeking comment or action from a representative in Washington;

conducting research to learn as much as possible about the event or person;

creating a scrapbook of news coverage related to a particular person, group, or event;

writing and performing songs in support or protest of an event or group;

contributing volunteer time or money to a group or cause in the news;

planning a student walk-a-thon or bike-a-thon for publicity or fundraising.

This was a very beneficial brainstorming exercise for my students. Although the options we listed were for the moment hypothetical, it was clear that students felt analyzing what we hear and read, being conscious of our emotions, finding ways to express ourselves, and exploring our options for action and response are all healthy ways of dealing with the complexities of our information age.

Students learned through this exercise that they can be more than passive recipients of the news; it's up to them to critically read and evaluate news coverage and then, based on their evaluations and judgments, to respond appropriately. Through their responses in writing and action, they can make a difference.

Rose Reissman, Community School District #1 and The Project for Social and Emotional Learning, Columbia Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York

Learning More about People We Know

Because students feel more secure when they write about what they know, using family members, friends, or other people they know well as the basis for writing assignments can provide a less threatening experience. The students are the experts, and their writing reflects their expertise.

When students could benefit from a gentle introduction to writing, it's a good idea to start with short writing assignments; even a few sentences will provide a beginning. The suggestions below involve assignments that are easy to grade holistically.

1. Write about a superstition which you think might be unique to your family or your friends. Do you know who originated this idea?

2. Write about a tradition observed by you and your family or by you and your friends. Most of us have traditions that center around holidays and special times of the year, but can you think of traditions you observe that don't involve holidays?

3. Write a character sketch about a family member or someone who has meant something special to you.

4. Write a character sketch about a family member or friend who lives far away. What characteristics of this person are most vivid to you when this person is not around?

5. Write a tribute to someone special in your family or in your circle of friends. What makes this person unique and different from everyone else you know?

6. (For pairs of students, with the requirement that the writings be positive.) Write a character sketch of your writing partner and give him or her your writing as a gift.

The next few ideas involve more researching and writing.

1. Students pair up. Each person interviews his or her partner about a specific relative or close friend. This evolves into a detailed biographical sketch about another student's selection. Students spend two class periods prewriting, asking questions, getting facts sorted, and transcribing information. Students check with their partners for feedback on the accuracy of their portrait, and end up learning a lot about each other as well.

2. Research a specific period of time with the help of someone who remembers the period. Write up a short paper and share it with the person you interviewed.

This will be more enjoyable if you first brainstorm what you are most interested in and then find a way to tie in the assignment with your own interest. If, for instance, you are interested in baseball or another sport, you might find someone who can talk to you about a golden era in the history of a particular team or player. If you are interested in vintage cars, the Beat generation, or early rock music, you could look for someone who was a teenager in the '40s, '50s, or '60s and who can share photos, stories, and memories with you. If you are interested in the sacrifices people had to make during the Depression, ask your grandparents, older neighbors, or a new friend from a local nursing home to talk to you about what they remember.

3. Research your family or a friend's family and find out something interesting that you didn't know. Describe your process of discovery and your findings in a one- to two-page paper. You

may conduct research through letters, interviews by phone or in person, reading family documents, looking at photos, and so on. Your discovery might be a tradition from your family or your friend's family, a piece of folklore passed down from generation to generation, a story of how relatives met and married, the knowledge that you or your friend has a famous or infamous relative, or some other interesting tidbit you unearth through your research.

To make these assignments more accessible, I read each assignment aloud, let the class brainstorm ideas for responding to it, and model for students the process of planning, preparing, and beginning to write. Students have several weeks to choose and complete three or more of these assignments; then they collect their writings in a packet and choose one to develop into a short oral presentation for the class.

Mara Malone, Central High School, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

A Winning "Introduce Yourself" Writing Activity

At the conclusion of our first class session together, I give my English/Language Arts students the following introductory writing assignment with a few simple instructions.

I ask them to write about themselves in the three ways indicated, to respond to most (if not all) of the items in each category, to aim for 1-3 pages, and to be prepared to turn in their papers at the beginning of class the following day.

Introduce Yourself in Writing
Please write about yourself in the following ways:

A. *As a person, generally:*

background
family
interests and hobbies
things you're good at
favorite places
favorite people
heroes or idols
future plans or goals

B. *As a student, generally:*

main school interests as far as classes go
academic strengths and weaknesses
study habits (when, where, how much)
other school interests (extracurricular)

C. *As a student of English/Language Arts, specifically:*

List and comment on your favorite book(s) of all time.
List and comment on a book or books you've read recently.
List magazines or newspapers you read regularly. Are you a newspaper reader? Which sections?
List and comment on your favorite movie(s) of all time.

List and comment on movie(s) you've seen recently.
Describe your TV watching habits (what you watch regularly, what you can't stand to watch).
Do you like to go to concerts, plays, galleries, poetry readings, dance performances, operas? (comment)
Describe the music you like, and identify your favorite singers, musicians, and/or bands.
Describe your strengths and weaknesses as a writer (forming and conveying ideas, getting started, organization, vocabulary, grammar, usage, spelling, etc.).
Describe your library and research skills.
Describe your experience with computers. (Any word-processing experience? e-mail? the Internet? programming? games?)
Comment on your speaking skills. (Are you comfortable in public speaking? calm? nervous? better one-on-one? in small groups? in large groups?)

D. *Other* (optional):

If there's anything else that you'd like me to know that might help *me* help *you* to be successful in this class, please feel free to include it here.

I've used this introductory writing assignment with middle school, high school, and university students, and I have found it to be an effective way to begin class for many reasons:

- The assignment continues the purposeful but friendly tone I work on establishing from the minute the bell rings on day one. It's an organized, thoughtful assignment, with clear instructions and expectations. The assignment suggests to students that writing is one of the things we'll be doing in here, so let's not waste any time!

- I discover a lot about who my students are from this exercise. It helps me to find out things I may have in common with each of them, and things they may have in common with one another, uncovering points from which to build relationships. Asking them to write about themselves personally, as well as scholastically also delivers a message to them about who I am; it lets them know I care about them—not only as students of English/ Language Arts, but as human beings.

- Section "C" of this assignment emphasizes "the arts" in English Language Arts and communicates to students my broad definition of the subject area we'll be studying together.

- The assignment elicits a writing sample from each student on the first day of class, helping me to identify those students who may require special services or extra individual assistance.

The assignment elicits information that may be useful in planning future lessons and assignments, in grouping students according to interests or hobbies, in selecting research topics, in planning individualized reading plans, and in building and developing students' skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. (I have students keep this assignment in their class folders for future class reference.)

- When I collect these papers on the second day of class, I intentionally go from student to student and pick up their assignments one at a time, carefully matching faces with names. This helps me to learn their names faster (not one of my strong suits, I'm afraid, but this helps!).

- This activity can be used as a springboard to help students in the class get to know each other, too. On day two, for example, you might say to students, "Find someone in class who answered one of the items in Section One the same as you did. Introduce yourself, and talk to each other for a while, noting other things you may have in common. In ten minutes, you'll be asked to introduce this person to the whole class, so you may wish to record a few notes on what you learn about him/her." This extends the writing activity to include interview and oral presentation skills.

- Section "D" of this assignment intentionally invites students to let me know things about them that might affect their performance and success in the class. It provides them with an early opportunity to tell me things that matter, but that they wouldn't necessarily come up to tell me in person the first day they meet me.

Under "D," students have shared with me sensitive, but relevant personal information, such as the recent death of a parent or an inordinate fear of speaking in front of large groups.

This information has, at times, helped me in making curricular and instructional decisions. (I've changed which stories to include in a particular unit, for example, if one I've planned seems to be about an especially sensitive issue for a student in class—or I've chosen to run it by the student first to see how he/she feels about studying it in class.)

These are some of the reasons I find this "Introduce Yourself" writing activity to be such an effective way to get my English language arts classes off to a good start.

Terry Martin, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington

Writing a Personal School Resumé

With more emphasis being placed on workplace writing, students at all levels are supposedly learning about resumés in many classes, but what they often learn is a resumé format, not a resumé writing process.

For adults, resumé writing is often a personal agony because writers, at vulnerable points in their lives, cannot always determine what they can offer to an employer. Parallels exist between the experience of adult resumé writers who struggle to develop persuasive arguments about their skills and experiences and young students who struggle to develop an appreciation of their skills and experiences in the role of their schooling.

A personal school resumé can help students learn and experience a resumé-writing process that makes sense for their current positions in life; can help students come to view their abilities in the context of their current lives—in which school plays an important role; and can help students understand that resumés "take stands" or try to prove that the resumé writer can do what the objective says.

In this assignment, students develop a resumé based on their strengths as the person they are, including their strengths as a student, family member, and community member as well as a person who has learned from particular hobbies, activities, experiences, etc. The final product is a resumé showing the audience how the student can be a successful student.

Where I've Learned

Ask students to brainstorm with you about places or contexts in which they have learned one or more skills they use in their lives, and make a list of their answers available to them.

In a university community where I once did a workshop, a multicultural sixth-grade class that had 18 countries represented in it eventually developed the following list:

A. Skills I've learned in school
This category was subdivided into lists of classes and the category "Other Activities," which was subdivided into various sports, clubs, whole school field trips, etc.

B. Skills I've learned by being part of a mosque, church, synagogue, or other religious group

C. Things I've learned during the summers or other vacations

D. Responsibilities I have at home

E. Things I've learned from or things I do with important people in my life

F. Things I've learned in traveling

G. Things I've learned from jobs
(You may choose to be parallel with your listings or not; the list will change with the level and age of the class.)

Noting Valuable Personal Experiences
Have students respond to their "Where I've Learned" Categories by writing as many examples of their own skills or knowledge in as many of the categories and subcategories as possible. They may mention that they "worked in groups" in a Health/P.E. class or "learned about history" in a religious group.

Encourage students to write with verbs at the beginning of their listings if possible. Encourage students to expand their initial offerings by letting them share ideas and work in groups at some stage of their responding.

Move to the next stage, but remember that students may come back to this part once they see where the assignment is heading. The writing in this part offers them a beginning.

Considering Audience Needs

Introduce the eventual goal of the pre-writing the students have just done—they are to write a resumé explaining to someone how and why they can be a successful student at the school (or, if you wish, in a particular class). This part includes three steps:

Audience—If possible, arrange the unit so that students have a real audience, such as a panel of parents, community members, students in upper level grades (including college), and administrators. Students will have a more realistic resume-writing experience than if they are writing to an imagined audience.

Tie the importance of researching a resumé audience into the assignment by inviting some of your eventual audience members to discuss what they think contributes to someone's being a

successful student. Students can consider this input as they compile their own lists in the third step, "What Does the Audience Need?" (If your students do not yet have a basic understanding of a resume's purpose, you may want to switch the order of the first two steps and begin with: What's a Resumé?")

What's a Resumé?—Familiarize students with the notion of a resumé. Depending on your students' ages and experiences, they will know various things about resumés. You may begin by asking them what they know about the documents, what kinds of information appear on resumés and why, and what the resumé's purpose is.

You can also share some resumés, but any you share should not be considered models to follow. Typical resumés can only serve as visuals to help students see how resumés present information in categories with headings that can persuade readers about the resumé writer's skills. If you think real resumés will give students the impression that they should follow those "models," then draw an outline of a resumé on the board. The outline only needs to show that resumés use categories, not what the categories are. The students will each eventually be creating their own categories.

As you discuss resumés, be sure to cover what kinds of information can be useful on a resumé (education, experience, skills, name and contact information, such as phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and home addresses), and emphasize that successful resumés actually try to convince readers to give the resumé writer a chance (e.g., an interview or a job). Resumés do more than just tell readers about the writer's background. In this assignment, student resumé writers will be trying to convince their reader(s) to give them a chance to be accepted as someone who can be a successful student.

What Does the Audience Need?—Have students separate a page into two columns. The left-hand side of the page should be labeled "What Schools and Teachers Need from a Student." Hold a general discussion of the kinds of skills, knowledge, and personality traits a school, teacher, and classmates would like students to have.

Eventually the class will have a list of such characteristics as "creative," "good thinking," responsibility," "humor," "helpful," "willing to try," "hard working," etc., perhaps along with more unusual contributions such as "good dancer," "willing to eat the school lunch," "willing to sell the school products," "artistic," and so on. Validate personal differences with a category titled "My Unique Skills."

Matching Up Lists

After students have brainstormed about the audience's wants, have them work with both lists ("Where I've Learned" and "Audience Needs") matching their experiences and skills across various "audience needs" categories. Much encouragement and discussion should occur as many students will not see how some of their skills and experiences may fit into various broad "audience needs" categories. Point out that students can add "audience needs" categories if they think of them after they begin the match-ups.

Drafting the Resumé

As in all writing processes, students need to go through planning, drafting, response getting, and many revising and editing steps before publishing their personal school resumés in a notebook in the library or as a collection shared with a real audience with which they've been working. The emphasis should be on carefully wording the objectives and on developing categories of skills

that can help the resumés readers see how the writers can meet the objectives. (See below for an annotated, simplified outline for one student's resume.)

This resume-writing assignment takes students through valuable discussion and writing processes with their peers, and results in students' increased confidence in their abilities; it should also serve as a useful background for these same students in the not-too-distant-future, when many apply for jobs and face the task of writing real resumés.

Kim Ballard, Ivy Tech State College, Lafayette, Indiana (ballardk@omni. cc. Purdue. ecu)

Annotated Sample Outline for Student's Resumé

Name
Address
Phone
E-mail

Objective

To show that I can succeed at X School because of my desire to learn, willingness to work hard, and friendliness

In resumés, objectives "set up" what will be supported by the rest of the document. Often, as in this resumé, the statement of the objective also mentions skills that will help the resume writer meet the objective.

Education

X Middle School, Address, 1995-1998 *(expected graduation)*
Areas of Special Interest: Science, Soccer

The heading "education" is used instead of "areas of interest." Such a heading can help students commit to topics they like. Liking a topic is one way of beginning to be successful at it.

Y Elementary School, Address, 1993-95

Z Elementary School, Address, 1989-93 Areas of Special Interest: Math, Reading

If you want to stress it, consistency is important and often challenging with resumés. Here the student decided there was no need to put "Areas of Special Interest" for both elementary schools.

Skills

Desire to learn
Spent extra hours working on a science project in Grade 5
Read 35 books over the summer break
Attended "Internet for Kids" class offered at church

This category replaces the "Experience" category on other resumé's.

In a prewriting stage, ask students to develop three or more categories of skills and support of those skills. Working from these, they can determine the desired wording for the objective that begins the resume.

I stressed to the student the value of showing where experience was gained, as an important part of the proof.

Willingness to work hard
Elected as "hardest-working player" in Y.W.C.A. soccer league
Am responsible for taking out trash and recycling at home
Served as volunteer to "Clean the Wabash River"

Friendliness
Have learned to consider others' feelings by working in World Geography groups
Have changed schools twice and made new friends each time

Honors/Awards

Honor Role, X, Y. and Z schools
Most Improved Soccer Player, 1996
Best Book Report on *To Tell the Truth*, 1995

Other categories such as "Related Activities," " Organizations," "Personal Achievements," and "Notable Achievements" can be added to suit your students and their lives.

Fairy Tales and the Language of Fiction

Several years ago my seniors were struggling to establish clear differences between what they considered rather vague literary terms. How was plot different from structure? How was tone different from mood? What was the influence of voice and point of view? In addition to class discussion and presenting examples from works we've read, I found the following exercise to be an effective tool to make these terms more meaningful.

First I select a short, familiar fairy tale and write five different versions of it. In the first, I change the *structure* of the story; in the second, I change the *mood;* in the third, I change the *tone;* in the fourth I change the *point of view;* and in the fifth, I change the way *a character is revealed.*

I read the original and the versions aloud to the class in turn and let them discover and point out what sorts of revisions I made, such as changing mood by replacing positive, upbeat modifiers and setting details with dark, dreary ones, or changing tone by inserting a number of short sarcastic asides. Through talking about the differences among all the versions, students gain a clearer understanding of the literary elements.

Then it's the students turn. I give them a week to choose short fairy tales and create their own five versions using the guidelines below. I keep several collections of fairy tales handy in the classroom and have a list of short possibilities on hand, but students are welcome to choose any fairy tales they like. I tell them that the exercise will be easiest the better they know the tale.

Student Guidelines

1. Select and photocopy a familiar *short* fairy tale.
2. Write a version in which you change the *structure* of the story.
3. Write a version in which you change the *mood* of the story.
4. Write a version in which you change the *tone* of the story.
5. Write a version in which you change the *point of view* of the story.
6. Write a version in which you change *the way a character is revealed.*

The students usually want to read their versions to the class, which is always enjoyable for everyone. We frequently combine our five versions, plus the original, into illustrated booklets as a final step.

I have found that students are much more confident with analytical papers assigned later in the course once they have clarified the terms by applying them to a simple piece of fiction such as a fairy tale. And when I ask the students at the end of the year what components of the course to keep, the fairy tale writings are always near the top of everyone's list.

Connecting with Veterans on Veterans Day

Each year students in our school district enjoy a day off school on Veterans Day. In the past, many of my students have had little understanding of the origin and purpose of that holiday; through the use of this interview project, they gain an understanding of Veterans Day while obtaining practice in public speaking. This project also fosters intergenerational communications and ties in to students' knowledge of geography and history.

About the first of October I remind the students of the upcoming November holiday, and I assign them the task of interviewing a veteran. As I often do, I give myself the task of doing the assignment along with my students. We conduct some practice interviews in the classroom and emphasize the value of recording the interviews.

We hold a class brainstorming session to generate questions for the interviews. Listed below are some typical questions. Students are also free to think up additional questions to include in their interviews.

What is your name?

In which branch of the service did you serve?

Where were you posted?

When were you in the service?

What was your job in the service?

What did you enjoy most about your time in the service? What did you enjoy least?

Describe a memorable experience from your time in the service.

If you could go back in time and change events or aspects of your life in the service, what would you change and why?

I encourage students to find interview candidates by asking their parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, neighbors, and so on. I let other teachers and school staff members know of the project as well, so they will be prepared for questions from students.

Students are responsible for conducting the interviews over the next few weeks and then preparing short (5- to 7-minute) presentations for the class based on what they learned.

As the holiday draws nearer, we create a schedule for students to give their presentations to the class. Students are encouraged to have visual aids to increase audience interest, and I make world and U.S. maps available. In some cases students have been able to borrow memorabilia from veterans for a class display, and some interviewees have even been able to attend the presentations and answer questions afterwards.

This activity gives students a personal connection to a type of life experience of which most people their age have little knowledge. Students gain valuable research and presentation experience as well; this assignment could also be useful as part of a larger unit in which students read literature related to war.

Jerry Ellsworth, Prescott High School, Prescott, Arizona

Our Class Assists with *Our Town*

When my class was about to read the play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, I considered the fact that my students were accustomed to stories, television shows, and movies featuring larger-than-life characters and extravagant dramatic events.

I thought it would be a good idea for them to start the reading with some understanding of how mundane, everyday occurrences could form the basis of an engaging story; I wanted them to realize that seemingly insignificant interactions can create a vivid sense of people and their lives. I accomplished this with the following exercise.

We started with a discussion of Act I, and I mentioned some of the ordinary events in the play, such as eating breakfast, getting dressed for school, and doing homework. We discussed how these events don't seem extraordinary; these are everyday events that aren't usually the source for literature.

Then I read aloud a short, one-page play I wrote for the occasion, titled *Our Class.* The characters of the play included a few students and myself. The dialogue was based on ordinary, forgettable conversations that had actually taken place in our classroom.

Here's an excerpt:

> *Our Class*—a drama
>
> Characters: Teacher, Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4
>
> Teacher: Today we're going to start reading *Our Town.*

Student 1: Is this the play we're going to see at the theater?

Teacher: Yes, it is. Did you all remember your permission slips?

Student 2: I have mine. (She removes it from her folder and hands it to the teacher.)

Teacher: Thank you. Can I have some help passing out the copies of *Our Town?*

Student 3: Sure, I'll help.

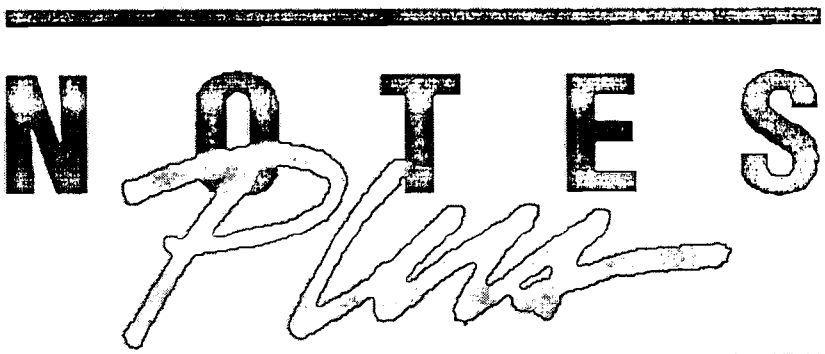
Student 4: So will I. (They rise and remove the books from the shelf.)

After I handed photocopies of the script to several volunteers, students performed the one-page mini-play for the class. Students laughed at the idea that our routine conversations could be turned into a play, but I believe this exercise helped sensitize them to the focus of *Our Town*. As we began reading Act I, students were better able to see how small, seemingly unimportant events can contribute to mood and theme and form the action of a play.

A natural adaptation to this, either before or after the reading, would be to ask students to spend several days noting and recording everyday interactions in their own lives and then to write and stage miniplays for the class.

Students might also gain insight into the reading by brainstorming and discussing mundane interactions presented in current books, television shows, and movies, and discussing why they think these interactions are included and what they reveal about characters or events.

Kristen M. Burgess, St. Mary's High School, Lancaster, New York



A Quarterly of Practical Teaching Ideas April 1999

"Photo Poems" and Descriptive Narratives

Many of my students seem to feel they have described something adequately by saying it's gross or nice or pretty or ugly.

To get them past that delusion, I have them write "photo poems." This exercise also serves as effective preparation for writing highly descriptive narratives when we do our next assignment: the autobiographical incident.

We begin by reading short stories and poems that are full of descriptive details. Some of my favorite selections for this purpose are the following:

- "Horned Toad" by Gerald Haslam
- "Broken Chain," "Oranges," and "Ode to La Llorona" by Gary Soto
- "Crossing" by Philip Booth
- "Knoxville, Tennessee" by Nikki Giovanni
- "The Treasure of Lemon Brown" by Walter Dean Myers

At the same time, since we are spending a minute or two at the beginning of each period memorizing "The Road Not Taken," as the first of the six or eight short poems we'll memorize through the year, I get the students to notice the descriptive passages ("words that make a movie in your mind") in that poem.

For many students, drawings are appropriate responses to the stories and poems we share. Having drawn pictures of images they've seen in the literature, the students then make lists of words that might help describe their images.

Then I give a brief presentation about imagistic poetry, which I have taken to calling "photo poems." (Jo Miles once observed that the haiku is "the closest thing in literature to a photograph." From that remark I coined the term.) It's worth showing students that word-photographs can record many details a camera cannot, such as smells, sounds, tastes,
textures, and temperatures.

Demonstrations come next, showing several forms of such poems, such as haiku (which many students are already familiar with), the tanka, the lune, the lanterne, the trilet, and the Crapsey cinquain (see the boxed description of poetry forms provided on page 3).

I also display examples and demonstrate the writing of "photo poems" that conform to no particular form restrictions, and I talk a little about free verse as one of a modern poet's options.

Then, since I normally use this assignment in early fall when the weather is pleasant, we take the assignment outside. We sit outside our classroom, which faces about thirty feet of lawn backed by rhododendrons and redwoods, and with our writing boards in our laps,

make up poems about what we see, hear, and smell—and things we remember and imagine.

Six Suggested Forms for Photo Poems

Haiku
An unrhymed Japanese verse form of three lines containing usually 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively

Tanka
An unrhymed Japanese verse form of five lines containing 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 syllables respectively

Lune
Three unrhymed lines containing 5, 3, and 5 syllables, or containing 3, 2, and 3 words

Lanterne
Five unrhymed lines in the shape of a Japanese lantern with 1, 2, 3, 4, and 1 syllables

Trilet
Three unrhymed lines, with 3, 6, and 9 syllables. (I think I found this form in *NOTES Plus* years ago.)

Crapsey Cinquaine
Invented by Adelaide Crapsey: five unrhymed lines, with 2, 4, 6, 8, and 2 syllables.

The assignment, which I pursue along with my students, is to write at least twenty photo poems. I ask for "albums" of short word pictures of things they have noticed, rather than a single long word "video." We take about a week for the writing.

I set the following guidelines:

1. Each poem must have a descriptive title which, if nothing else, gives the subject, where it was observed, and at least the approximate time and/or date. For example, think of a caption written in a photo album: "Pines Near Camp, Trinity Alps, July, 1998."

2. The subject should be quite specific. A detail that is part of an entire scene is appropriate. The subject may be one we imagine or remember; it need not be where we are writing, as long as it is present in the writer's mind.

3. The poems can be in any form, including free verse, but I ask students not to use rhyme. I do encourage them to use short lines. I ask them to try for a length of between three and fifteen lines.

4. Students are to use present tense, and the time-span depicted in the poem should be no more than a few minutes. It's even possible that, as in many haiku, there won't be any verb at all.

This experience yields papers which are among my favorites to read during the whole year. If used towards the start of the school year, it can help the teacher get acquainted with students and learn what they are noticing in their worlds. Finally, it helps students become more aware of the sort of sharp details that make their narratives vivid and "cinematic."

Dave Harvey, Winship Junior High School, Eureka, California

Writing around the Clock

I wanted my creative writing students to use poetic techniques to create vivid, descriptive poetry. Inspired by a poem by Wislawa Szymborska titled "Four in the Morning," I decided to provide students with a topic in order to encourage writing about something other than love or dating, a recent rut into which they had fallen.

This would also allow them to see a variety of interpretations on a common topic. I used this exercise with a class of twenty-four students, which worked nicely with the theme of the hours of the day, but the idea can be adapted for various class sizes.

First, I gave each student a slip of paper with an hour of the day written on it, such as "one a.m." Then I asked the following questions, giving students time to respond in their notebooks.

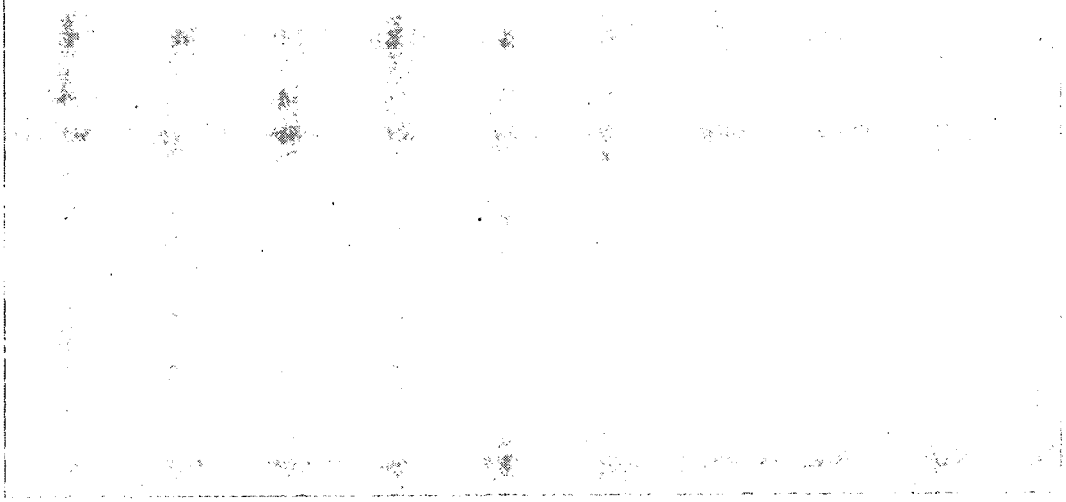
1. List sounds you associate with your time of day. Describe them, list them, and feel free to try onomatopoeia.
2. What animal is this hour of the day most like? Why?
3. What color is your hour?
4. What do *you* do during this hour?
5. What do *others* do during this hour?
6. Does this hour pass quickly or slowly?

My students then took approximately 20 minutes to shape some or all of their responses into a short poem of about five to ten lines. The hour of the day, as it appeared on the original slip of paper, was to be the title of the poem.

When students were done writing, they pushed their desks into a circle and arranged themselves in order like a clock. We began with "One A.M." The student with that assignment read her title and poem aloud. Without any comments, the next student read "Two AM." aloud, and we continued through the "day." Once we had gone through the entire day, we discussed the experience.

My students raved about the poems, both their own and others. I was pleased not only because they effectively used metaphors, similes, personification and other techniques, but because they recognized those techniques in the poems of their classmates.

We were unable to obtain permission for Web publication of the poem "For in the Morning" which was published in Sounds, Feeling, Thoughts, Seventy Poems by Wislawa Syzmborska (Princeton University Press, 1981)



At the end of the 55-minute period, we read Wislawa Szymborska's poem "Four in the Morning," included above.

For homework, students chose their own hour and wrote a new poem. They were not limited to the questions I asked in class. Many students chose their "hour poems," as we came to call them, for inclusion in their portfolios.

I am considering working with our school's speech and drama classes next year to present a dramatic reading of the "day."

I admit that the twenty-four hour poems sounded quite impressive when read aloud in sequence. However, other sequences could be used to accommodate other class sizes. For smaller classes the lesson could be revised to cover the hours of a school day or the sixteen or seventeen waking hours. For a larger class, the teacher could make out duplicate slips for some or all of the hours.

Christine Burt, Dumont High School, Dumont, New Jersey

A Testimonial for the I-Wish Poem

In *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* (Vintage Books/Chelsea House Publishers, 1970), Kenneth Koch describes the I-Wish poem as a list poem in which every line begins with "I wish" and which contains "elements that will excite a child's imagination and test a child's ingenuity."

The I-Wish poem can also provide an enjoyable collaborative experience for middle and high school students, and can help them become more comfortable writing poetry.

To experience the process from a student's point of view, my current English education methods students and I recently constructed an I-Wish poem together, following guidelines adapted from Maxwell and Meiser's *Teaching English in Middle and Secondary Schools* (Merrill Prentice Hall, 1997):

- Ask students to complete a sentence beginning with "I wish ...."
- Have students write their lines on individual 3" by 5" cards to aid in organization.
- Lay all the cards on a table. Read all the lines aloud and then collaborate with students to create a mutually agreed-upon arrangement for the lines.
- If the same or similar lines are repeated by more than one student, use them as the refrain in the poem.
- Include all students lines in the final poem to create a sense of ownership among the students.
- Type the poem in a word processing program and distribute it to the entire class. Publish the poem wherever possible.

Although in this case we did not use a specific topic to construct our class poem, L. Fagin suggests in *The List Poem* (Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1991), that teachers begin with a theme, provide examples, and indicate precise characteristics. Drawing details from everyday experiences around a specific theme is one way to generate enthusiasm and give students some direction initially.

Our "I Wish" Poem

I wish the sun would shine everyday and that, at any given time, I could take a moment to just listen to the sounds of waves crashing against the shores on an endless sun-baked beach or better yet, go skiing on some majestic snow-blanketed Colorado mountains.

I wish there were no race, class, or gender prejudices in the world and that everyone respected, truly loved, and befriended each other.

I wish my best friend didn't live so far away.

I wish the concept of money didn't exist or at least were not so important. A genuine smile should be the only price for the necessities in life.

I wish all children could grow up in families where they knew they were loved and wanted, where they had books to read, abundant educational opportunities, and adults in their lives who told them daily that they could achieve greatness even in the face of adversity.

I wish I could experience my children's return to infancy— just for a week!

I wish we all seriously desired to be a little better than we are—even professional athletes, because they are role models whether we like it or not.

I wish we all knew for certain what to do in times of difficulty and how to duplicate the good things in life for all humanity.

We discovered firsthand that the collaborative nature of the list poem can help to increase confidence in writing poetry and sharing one's work. No matter the age of the students, the I-Wish poem helps writers overcome their inhibitions and write wonderful poetry.

B. Joyce Stallworth and students in CSE 479: Methods of Teaching Secondary School English, the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

The Postcard Short Story

I use this assignment with a short story unit, as a follow-up to class study of Saki's *The Open Window.* It is best used after students have developed an understanding of irony as a literary device.

The assignment centers on a short short story from Kent Thompson's collection, *Open Windows: Canadian Short Short Stories* (Quarry Press, 1988). Kent Thompson, a professor of English at the University of New Brunswick in Canada and a fiction editor and author, states in his Afterword to this volume, "For reasons which no one quite understands, writers in the past five or six years everywhere have begun to write very short fiction."

The publisher notes, "This collection of short short stories marks the advent of a new literary form in Canada—what the critics have variously called 'quick fiction,' 'flash fiction,' or 'subway stories.' Kent Thompson calls these 1-2 page stories 'postcard fiction'; indeed several of the stories in this collection were composed on postcards."

I share this information with students and distribute copies of Thompson's story, "Unreeling" (see below) for students to read.

"Unreeling"

A short short story by Kent Thompson

Helen has left me and moved back to 1930. She is singing in a log-cabin Roadhouse out on old Highway 42. Almost nobody travels out that way anymore. She wears an ivory-colored evening gown and has marcelled her hair. Her lover is the owner who sometimes gives ballroom dancing exhibitions with her. The patrons are kids who stare in wonder—not, as Helen and her lover believe, at the grace of the old ballroom dances or the sweetness of the lachrymose song—but at the audacity of the two of them daring to live outside their allotted time. I sometimes go there and contribute to the decor by sitting at a table wearing a fedora. But I think I am slipping out of her memory; and will disappear as soon as I am forgotten.

Reprinted from *Open Windows: Canadian Short Short Stories* with the permission of Quarry Press, 240 King's Street East, Kingston, Ontario K7L 3A6.

We discuss Thompson's story as a class and I ask for students' impressions. Students generally like the story and find it unusual and funny. I ask them if they can see irony in the story; we may cite such things as the incongruity of the first line coupled with the matter-of-fact tone; or the fact that the speaker whose lover has left him goes to the roadhouse not to get her back or seek revenge, but to wear a Fedora and "contribute to the decor."

When I ask for ideas on what a writer would need to consider in planning a piece of postcard fiction, suggestions typically include choosing details carefully, cutting out words that aren't essential, and getting the reader interested with the very first sentence.

I give students other examples of postcard fiction to read as well. (I use stories from Thompson's book, but similar examples from another source could be used.) I ask students to read the stories first, and then to go back and look for characterization, setting, point of view, irony, and plot elements.

After we talk about another example or two in class, I make this writing assignment.

You are to create a postcard short story—one that attempts to offer an "open window" on some ironic aspect of life, using Kent Thompson's "Unreeling" as a guide for approximate length.

Each story should have one or more characters, setting, plot action with a crisis and climax, a resolution, and employ irony.

I ask students to brainstorm first for the story elements they want to use; once they have a rough draft prepared, they meet with partners for feedback and revisions. Their postcard stories are due the following day.

Students are tickled by the postcard fiction format; they enjoy reading a variety of examples as well as trying their own. And the final writings are so short that it's easy to find time to share and discuss them with the whole class.

Ellen Zaki, Marquette Senior High School, Marquette, Michigan

Writing "Great Beginnings"

Students often have difficulty writing effective first sentences or first paragraphs when they write anecdotes or short stories.

One of the best ways I've found to help them improve is to pay attention to what techniques skilled writers have used to create great beginnings. Using young adult literature seems to work well because young writers tend to recognize techniques used by writers they enjoy reading themselves.

In advance, I ask students as homework to look over books and stories they have read recently and to pick two or three first sentences that they think are particularly interesting and effective at drawing in readers.

Then in class we compile all our contributions on the chalkboard. I contribute the ten beginnings shown below. We review all the examples and talk about why they are effective.

Next I ask students to write their own effective beginnings. I write one as well. This exercise takes about ten minutes.

When we've all written at least one beginning, we take turns reading our "great beginnings" out loud to the class. We talk about what makes each effective or not so effective. We help each other by offering ideas to improve on what we have written.

I collect what students have written and, for the next class, prepare a sheet that includes all our great beginnings on it. I distribute copies to the class.

The final assignment is for each student to choose one of the great beginnings (not necessarily his or her own) and to write a story using this great beginning as a starting point. The results are usually excellent!

Sample "Great Beginnings"

1. On a sunny morning in late September my husband called me out to the bard of our Quebec farm. (Source: *Friends for Life*)

2. At first Donald Lay still. Scarcely a muscle moved. The boulders and the bushes screened him from view. (*Friends for Life*)

3. Sir James Garvey, bachelor and famed explorer of the North Pole, was found murdered in his bedroom. (*Still More Two-Minute Mysteries*)

4. The body in the woods brought Dr. Haledjian's early morning nature walk to an abrupt end.
(*Still More Two-Minute Mysteries*)

5. Bobby Zenner disappeared sometime between noon and one o'clock on the third Saturday in April. Later, under police questioning, Karen would not be able to pinpoint any more clearly than that. (*The Third Eye*)

6. At twenty five minutes after two on the afternoon of the third of January, I stepped out of a frost-covered CNR train onto the worn, wooden platform of Bleke, Saskatchewan. Since then, when I've permitted myself to think of it at all, I've convinced myself that it was there and then that I began to lose my mind. (*Why Shoot the Teacher*)

7. It was a wild, windy southwestern spring when the idea of killing Mr. Griffin occurred to them. (*Killing Mr. Griffin*)

8. It was silent and dark, and the children were afraid. (*Walkabout*)

9. They murdered him. As he turned to take the ball.... (*The Chocolate War*)

10. My dog is old. And he farts a lot. His eyes are constantly runny because he's going blind. (*Friends for Life*)

Daphne Nelson, Bishop's College School, Lennoxville, Quebec

Turn On Your Computers and Turn On Your Students

The infusion of technology into the English curriculum is welcomed by some teachers and feared by others. Some are intimidated by this introduction of technology into the classroom, thinking that it means that "Now I have to stop doing everything I *have* been doing and start doing something else." But this is not the case at all. Using technology as an instructional strategy and tool simply means that (1) you can do things more efficiently, and (2) you can do things now that you couldn't do before. Some examples:

Teaching students how to revise their writing has always been a problem. To students, the process of *revision* usually means to write the composition neater this time and to use only one side of the paper and . . . oh, yes, check the spelling. But, using a computer in class to demonstrate the revision process can change students' perception and understanding suddenly, dramatically, and permanently.

The next time that you engage students in writing a rough draft, solicit a student volunteer to type their draft on the computer and allow his or her writing to be used for this revision activity. Project the student volunteer's draft onto a big screen at the front of the room so that the entire class can see it. (An overhead projector and an LCD panel make this magic happen; see your school's media specialist for details). The student author should first read his or her draft aloud; and, then invite class members to suggest revisions. These suggestions for revision can deal with any one of the following four possible changes:

- ADD a word or phrase or sentence or section.
- DELETE a word or phrase or longer part of the draft.
- RE-ARRANGE a particular part. Move the third paragraph closer to the beginning of the paper for instance.
- SUBSTITUTE one word or phrase for another. Take out this word and instead, use this other word, for example.

The student author should listen to all suggestions and will certainly encounter some contradictory advice. One classmate will direct the author to eliminate a certain phrase while another student will state that the phrase is perfectly fine and should be left untouched. No changes are made to the text as it appears on the computer until the student author says, "Okay, here's what I want to change." At this point, the desired modification is made. In this way, the author retains control over the paper, accepting responsibility for incorporating some suggestions and simply rejecting others.

Within a half-hour of this revising activity, the student author's paper should be made substantially "new and improved." At this point, direct the entire class to assemble in small groups and begin revising the drafts of group members, one at a time, in the same way. Now the students will know what to do and how to go about the business of revision since they have just participated in a whole-class demonstration of the process. And the process was demonstrated clearly and efficiently through the use of technology.

Jeffrey N. Golub, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida

Reflecting on Repercussions

"Can we please do the 'Richard Project'?"

It is difficult to imagine middle school students begging to do more work. When that work involves a great deal of writing and performing, it is even more difficult to believe, but the "Richard Project" always leaves my students begging for more.

I found that this project helps my students to reflect and to become more self-aware. It also helps them learn about characterization.

The project starts with a reading from the *English Journal.* The April 1996 issue of *EJ* included a story by Cathy Belben entitled "Serious Repercussions" in which the life of an angry, artistic young man named Richard takes one bad turn after the other. (Belben's article is available at www.ncte.org/ notesplus.)

Richard indicates that all teachers except the art teacher—who sees more potential talent than potential problems—loathe him. I read the story aloud and edit the language somewhat as I go. Students enjoy hearing it, and at this point many admire Richard's paranoid, rebellious behavior.

After hearing the story, we discuss repercussions and choices. I drop a rock into a wide bowl I've filled with water, just to enable students to see repercussions. Then I get a discussion going on how the decisions of adults affect their children. Students discuss how their own decisions affect and are affected by others. That's when I know I have really hooked their interest.

The next phase of this project involves some individual timed writings. I ask students to respond to a variety of questions ranging from alternative decisions Richard could make to describing his physical appearance.

Once this is completed and students have begun to form more complex views of Richard, I place students in groups of three or four. Their first assignment is to collectively come up with the "back story." Since we meet Richard at the age of sixteen, they have to create his childhood. Doing this makes them think about influences and consequences, as well as about how characters are created in general.

Once they have completed this step, each student in a group selects one of the following times in Richard's life: *one day after this story ends, age nineteen, age twenty-five, age thirty-five.* (If I have a group with only three students, I take *age nineteen* off the list.) Now, with the help of some group discussion, each student writes a story from Richard's point of view at the selected age. Students consider where they see him heading in life, what decisions he makes, and how he feels about his life. At this stage students do some serious thinking, and I start hearing comments like, "He wouldn't do that because in our story he was close to his mom," and "But we said his sister died. How can he find her?"

It's very rewarding to see students interacting, revising their views, making predictions, and defending their understanding of the story and the "back-story."

After students finish writing their stories, they swap them and begin conducting the most earnest revisions they will do all year. When they've completed the revisions, they're ready for the next step: turning Richard's life into a play.

In groups, students select a time frame, plot, setting, and mood. They draft and revise scenes, polish dialogue, and practice together, and I monitor their progress. After several practice sessions, students are eager to perform their own "Richard stories" in front of the class.

In the past I have watched a variety of performances from poignant family dramas to Richard's appearance on Oprah and even Richard as a family counselor helping another "Richard." Sometimes the plays get out of hand—like the time Richard went on Jerry Springer's show; however, the performances are usually thought out and respectable.

At the end of the project, students have a "Richard Book" which includes their collaborative and individual stories, a play, and a letter to Richard, which occasionally but not always offers hope for Richard. I know this project offers hope to my students, as the close association and identification that takes place between them and Richard causes them to reflect and to question their actions and reactions.

Doris Brewton, Pike County High School, Brundidge, Alabama

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