

READING

Comprehension Strategies to Improve

WRITING

Skills in the High School English Class

The high school English curriculum is comprised of grammar, writing, vocabulary, and a variety of literary works.

Some of these works are categorized as classic literature, and some are modern; however, regardless of the category, students can be sure of one thing in the English classroom: the writing assignment. Good writers are often avid readers. Although reading comprehension skills are usually taught in early elementary and middle school grades, the need for them extends to the high school classroom. E-mail, texts, tweets, blogs, and instant messaging have become the means by which students communicate, thereby increasing the need for reading and writing skills.¹ While these writing forms use minimal word counts and sometimes lack traditional sentence structure, the reader still needs to understand what is being stated and sometimes implied. Further, the writer must know how to effectively communicate his or her

ideas using these methods. Whether students pursue employment as blue-collar or white-collar workers, employers expect them to be able to read, write, and comprehend numerous types of communication.²

As secondary-level English teachers prepare young people to attend college and enter the workforce, they must develop their reading and writing skills, which requires addressing and overcoming challenges in these areas. Luke and Grieshaber³ suggested that traditional ways of teaching such as lecturing, reading and answering questions, defining words and using them in sentences, etc., may not address the needs of all students. If this is the case, high school English teachers must implement specific strategies to help improve reading and writing skills.

Strategies for Implementation

Journaling

Journaling is considered an effective strategy for teaching reading and writing skills. This form of writing can take place before, after, or during

a reading activity or experience. Journaling affords students an opportunity to write about their reaction to the theme of a text, react (positively or negatively) to an event in the text, express their views about controversial ideas in the text, or explore their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the text. Expressing themselves through the written word increases readers' understanding of the text and highlights the importance of sharing their ideas with others.

The instructor may use journaling to create an atmosphere of trust so the participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts with others. Journal writing also teaches higher-order thinking. A study by Shaarawy⁴ found that journaling positively affected young people's critical-thinking skills, making them better students and communicators. Lo⁵ concluded that portfolio journals foster student achievement by giving them more control of their own thoughts and ideas, placing the

teacher in the role of an observer who comments and offers guidance when necessary. Opportunity to write freely in a journal creates a more relaxed environment, thereby encouraging the struggling writer to express himself or herself without concern about a possible grade.

Journaling can take many forms: a reading log where students merely record the title of the reading material, author, and number of pages read; an anecdotal reading log where they record the title of the reading material, the date the material was read, and answers to guided questions about the reading; a diary entry; or a reading checklist. It might be an informal record of thoughts and reactions to a text, or a formal record of the thought processes necessary to complete a task. Journaling will generally help to improve students' reading and writing skills.

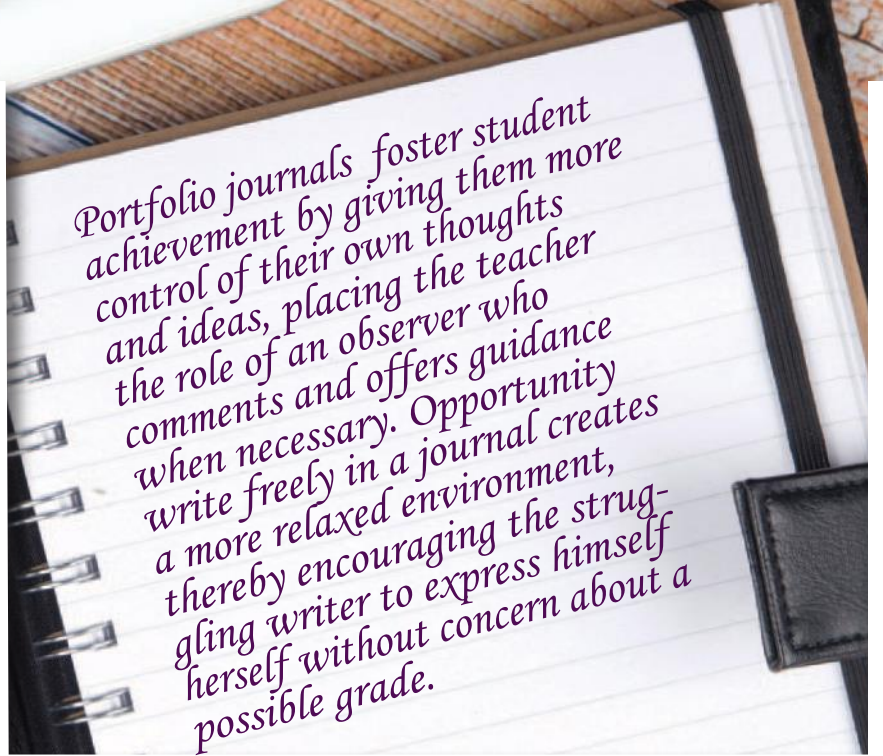
Best Practices

The teacher can use several approaches to journaling:

- He or she can have students free write about their experiences, future aspirations, or views on certain current events, jotting down all their ideas without consideration for grammar, spelling, or other writing rules.⁶ For example, the prompt "In five years I see myself. . . ." encourages students to set goals for themselves and is a great strategy to help them plan for the future.

- Students may also journal about their weekly activities by recording both positive and negative things that happened, exploring strategies to avoid the negatives and foster the positives, and thereby achieving an understanding of what areas they are able to control.

- Group journaling is a creative way to involve students in writing since it encourages reflection, offers opportunities to raise important questions and explore difficult ideas, develops speaking and writing skills, and enhances group development.⁷ To introduce this exercise, the instructor



provides a hardcover journal and suggests a topic about which each student is to write a response in the journal. After the exercise is completed, the instructor will ask volunteers to read their responses aloud as a segue to group discussion. This method will help students develop confidence about sharing their thoughts in front of a group. It will further encourage them to write with a specific purpose and audience in mind.

- Group journaling can also be used for personal expression. Several students can be offered the opportunity to write in the journal during a class period. Their entries may include poems, songs, and ideas for short stories or articles. The teacher may allot several days for students to read the contributions aloud to those in their groups or to the entire class, after which those listening can be encouraged to offer suggestions or make observations about the journal entries. The instructor should display the journal in a designated area in the classroom so that students may write in it whenever they wish to record a thought.

Assessment

Journal assessment can take many forms, based on the nature of the journal and the purpose of the assignment. After each student selects a certain number of journals to submit for grading, the instructor can use a rubric similar to the one posted by Richmond Community School that assesses content, idea development, organization, and mechanics (see Appendix for the link that leads to the journaling rubric). For the less-structured, free-written journals, the instructor will assign a completion grade. For example, if the student is required to write 10 journal entries but submits only eight, he or she would receive 80/100.

One creative way to encourage journaling is to have students create an electronic book comprised of at least one journal entry from each student. The entries can be saved as PDF files and uploaded and stored at an HTML5 Website. The students email the instructor a link to the book (see Appendix for link that leads to the HTML5 Website). The instructor can use the rubric referred to above to assess the electronic book by adding a creativity category to the rubric. The group journal does not generally receive a grade since it is

used to encourage ideas and increase students' comfort level in sharing ideas. If the instructor chooses to assign a grade, he or she can consider class participation points.

Varied Instruction

Varied instruction is an additional strategy English teachers may implement in the classroom. Because people learn in different ways, teachers must vary instruction to meet the needs of every student.⁸ Several studies have been conducted on the multiple intelligences and how they can be used to address students' learning in any academic setting. Howard Gardner of Harvard University identified nine different intelligences: musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and existential.⁹ One strategy English teachers can implement to address spatial intelligence is visual literacy.¹⁰ Pictures and films that relate to the content of various assignments help students make concrete connections to abstract ideas. The visual content appeals to their need to "see" meaning in action. For example, the student may interpret meaning based on body language.

Verbal or dramatic readings of passages help students hear the emotions of literary characters and develop short-term understanding of them. This strategy addresses the musical intelligence where students interpret the meaning of sounds. A change in voice inflection may help students identify emotional reactions to characters, conflict, and conflict resolution. Role-playing and problem-solving scenarios are bodily kinesthetic activities that allow students to move beyond the assignment to engagement with the text and real-life experiences. Exploring how the natural environment affects the psyche provides opportunity for self-exploration and appreciation of different cultures, beliefs, and experiences. These varied methods of

instruction integrate several of the multiple intelligences.

Varying assignments to incorporate the multiple intelligences will also improve student achievement. Strategies an English teacher can use to improve students' academic success in his or her writing class include the following:

- Ask students to use visual skills to create a book cover, painting, drawing, or picture book to express ideas;
- Connect a song to an idea; or
- Create a conflict-and-resolution situation that mirrors content taught in class.

Best Practices

Instructors can use picture books to enrich teaching and learning in language arts as well as in mathematics, social sciences, sciences, and visual and performing arts.¹¹ Creating picture books enables students to chronicle major events in their lives. Having students write the narrative using elements such as theme, plot, characterization, and conflict and resolution will provide the framework for storytelling. Having them exemplify those elements using pictures will help them identify the effectiveness of non-verbal communication in writing. The compilation of pictures can later be uploaded as a book using the free electronic HTML5 Website mentioned earlier in this article. This will enable students to share the electronic book in class and with others through a link provided by the Website.

Assessment

One way to assess creative projects is peer grading. In order to ensure anonymity, students' names are replaced by numbers and the submissions read to a different class. A rubric can enable students to rate their peers based on the criteria for the assignment and the creativity of the ideas employed (see Appendix for link to the visual presentation rubric). The narrative receiving the highest score receives recognition (as award, prize, or certificate). This

technique motivates students to submit their best work in order to win the prize, while the anonymity ensures a degree of objectivity. To further remove pressure from the writer, the instructor should assign a completion grade. This way, everyone receives credit for his or her effort.

Socratic Circles

Socratic circles are teacher-led discussion sessions organized around a series of open-ended questions on a given topic. Also known as Socratic Seminars, these whole-class conversations help foster critical thinking and allow students to gain in-depth understanding of a concept or situation.¹² Socratic Circles have been used by many English teachers to help encourage student participation during reading and group discussions. Socratic circles give ownership of the conversation and sharing of ideas to the students to ensure dialogue about a topic. The discussion generally focuses on open-ended questions that foster comprehension of the reading material.¹³

Participating in oral activities such as read-alouds and think-alouds allows students to hear different voice inflections and verbal interpretations and to ask questions while reading. Researchers Gillam, Fargo, and St. Clair Robertson¹⁴ found that students who participated in think-alouds were able to recall information and respond to questions about the text with greater accuracy. English teachers can use these strategies to help improve their students' reading and writing skills. The more information students retain, the better they understand what they have read, what they synthesize, and how they convey that information to someone else in the classroom or workplace.

Best Practices

According to the Paideia Active Learning Website,¹⁵ Socratic seminar questions are open-ended, thought-provoking, and clear. The instructor

devises a list of questions for the students to answer about the literary text such as: “What do you think motivates the character?; What would be another good title for this piece?; What evidence is used to support the writer’s stand on the issue?; What additional points could be included in the text to further explain motive or ideas?; Based on this story/selection, do you think the author believes that human beings are inherently good or evil?” These questions encourage the reader to use his or her critical-thinking skills to analyze the selection.

Assessment

One of the best ways to assess Socratic circles is to use a wholistic rubric, which allows the teacher to measure the amount of critical thinking and the value of input during the discussion. The rubric should be designed to measure the amount of participation by each student and the quality of the responses (see Appendix for the link to the wholistic rubric).

Project-based Learning

Project-based Learning (PBL) is another strategy that works well in the English classroom. In addition to group discussion activities, an English teacher can also design project-based assignments to help students increase their comprehension and writing skills. In most working environments, several people contribute their expertise to produce a product. Schools considered to have successful advanced academic programs include project-based learning in their course of study. As early as elementary school, students are learning to work together to solve equations, build models, and report findings. Research indicates that combining reading and writing in project-based learning is more effective than addressing each area separately.¹⁶ Project-based learning should continue through middle, high school, and college courses. English teachers should be able to implement this type

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of teaching by simply redesigning some of their lessons.

Best Practices

The research paper is considered a project in most high school English classes. The instructor may redesign this project so students complete it as a group. The group is thus responsible for developing and agreeing to a research question or questions. They then conduct research and determine the best way to report their findings (see Appendix for the link that leads to guidelines for creating the assignment). The project may require several group meetings.

This type of project can be designed to incorporate the aforementioned strategies. The group is tasked to keep a research journal and a duty log, participate in Socratic circles, and use read-aloud/think-aloud strategies to share ideas. Using their preferred intelligence, students can create graphs and charts to record information. They can also create outlines to express their ideas and make videos or PowerPoints to report their findings. The teacher can have the group write a script, create and enact a scenario, create a mu-

sical score, and/or provide a written paper to accompany the visuals.

Assessment

Assessment for this type of project can take many forms. Since the research project is completed by a group of students, the instructor can include a peer evaluation in which group members evaluate one another’s performance. The peer evaluation needs to be administered several times throughout the research project to determine whether each group member is completing his or her assigned tasks (see Appendix for the link to the peer-evaluation rubric).

The instructor then uses the responses to counsel the group members and to make necessary adjustments in group membership and assigned tasks. The instructor will need to determine which parts of the research project to assess. For example, he or she may assign participation grades for the Socratic circle sessions. The research assignments submitted for formal assessment should include the outline, an annotated bibliography, and final paper, all of which can be graded by the instructor using a rubric (see Appendix for the link for creating rubrics). The oral presentation of the research project is evaluated by the students and the instructor and used as a means of discussion about the research topic and the research process (see Appendix for the link to the peer-group evaluation and oral-presentation evaluation).

Conclusion

Reading and writing skills are vital for students to become productive citizens. Although students are introduced to reading and writing skills in elementary and middle school, these skills must also be reinforced in high school. The English teacher can implement a number of reading and writing strategies to ensure student success.¹⁷ Implementing effective, best-practice strategies at the high school level will help ensure that students have first-rate reading compre-

hension and writing skills—not only as they matriculate through school, but also as they enter the workforce. ☞

This article has been peer reviewed.

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APPENDIX

1. Journal assessment: <http://www.rcs.k12.in.us/files/Rubric%20for%20Assessing%20a%20Journal%20Entry.pdf>.
2. Free Website for electronic book: <http://fliphtml5.com/>.
3. Rubric for visual assignments: http://mrsaustin9.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/9/0/10908540/visual_representation_assignment.pdf.
4. Rubric for Socratic seminar: <http://www.fcusd.org/cms/lib03/CA01001934/Centricity/Domain/1250/Socr%20Holistic%20Rubric.pdf>.
5. Guidelines for project-based research assignment: <https://isa.umich.edu/content/dam/sweetland-assets/sweetland-documents/teachingresources/Teaching-Project-basedAssignments.pdf>.
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