The Power of Workshop

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Abstract

This action research explores the use of Readers'-Writers' Workshop (RWW) in the secondary English classroom. RWW often requires a paradigm shift on the part of the teacher to allow for more student autonomy and limiting direct instruction time. The researcher sought to discover whether or not this model would impact the engagement level and the attitudes toward reading of high school seniors. Findings suggest RWW can be an effective tool for engaging students, as well as, helping students to develop positive attitudes with reading practices.

Key Words: Readers' Workshop, Writers' Workshop, secondary, English classroom, engagement

Introduction

At the beginning of the school year, I always share this quote by Mark Twain with my high school English students: "The man who does not read has no advantage over the man who cannot." This sparks conversation about the purpose of literacy and leads into introducing a classroom expectation: daily, independent reading. This is a practice that can be established early on in the school year in order to encourage the habit of regular independent reading without teacher or adult guidance. As a class (teacher included), time is set aside every class period for students to read a book of their choosing.

For some students, this can be a dream come true: they have their books out before class starts, they read past the timer, and they devour text after text. For other students, however, it is a time of dread. Among the 12th graders who participated in the research, many repeatedly said things such as: "Ugh, do we have to read today?", "I don't read.", or "I'm not good at reading." Many of these same students also struggled to engage in the class material on a regular basis.

Problem Statement

As the academic year continued, it became evident even students who were "readers" were struggling to be active and engaged at times in course work. This led the researcher to question how all these students could be reached more positively and encouraged to develop the habit of reading to improve overall literacy. Kelly Gallagher (2003), teacher and adolescent literacy specialist, took on similar challenges in his classroom. In his book *Reading Reasons*, Gallagher (2003) admits there is not an easy solution to the issue and "if there were, the problem of motivating students to read more wouldn't be as widespread" (p. 4). Gallagher suggests students need a reason to read beyond earning points or a grade. Helping students find "meaningful, intrinsic reasons to read" seemed to be the answer (Gallagher, 2003, p. 38). How to do that, however, remained unclear at first.

A potential solution became clear after the researcher attended a readers'-writers' workshop training (RWW) also known as the workshop model: a classroom that situates the student at the center of reading and writing practice. Previously, the researcher only thought of this model in the context of the elementary school classroom. However, after the three day training, it became clear it could be beneficial in addressing the lack of student engagement, as well as, encourage the habit of daily reading.

Literature Review: The Theory of Workshop

It was critical to look at the professional literature written prior to beginning the research to make sure the researcher's concept of RWW was solid. *The Workshop Book* by Samantha Bennett (2007) poses and answers the question, "Why workshop?" Bennett (2007) describes RWW not as a model, but as a structure, routine, and system. The structure of the workshop most people are familiar with: "short mini lesson, a student work time, and a debrief" (Bennett, 2007,

p. 9). However, Bennett (2007) acknowledges the often thought of "perfect ratio" for the workshop structure—15-minute mini lesson, 45-minute work-time, 15-minute debrief— causes teachers to "fail" and abandon the idea of workshop. Beyond structure, she argues workshop needs to "sit at the core of a teacher's practice" (Bennett, 2007, p. 10). Situating the practice as a routine that benefits both students and teachers.

Finally, the text frames workshop as a system. Bennett (2007) defines this as "*all three parts*—mini lesson, worktime, debrief—orchestrated with purposeful reasons in a purposeful manner in order to 'serve a common purpose'" (p. 14). This can only be possible by adding on the additional layer of the teaching cycle: assessment, planning, and instruction. Another way to consider this is that it is a cycle within a cycle. Not only does each piece of workshop feed into the next, but within each piece, teachers are assessing where students are at, making plans to adjust instruction, and then in fact, implementing those changes through instruction of some kind.

The remainder of Bennett's (2007) book focuses on the happenings inside workshop classrooms. However, these classrooms describe RWW functioning at the elementary level. Other sources provided greater insight into how this model functions at the secondary level, such as a podcast published to *Choice Literacy,* a multimedia resource for teachers and literacy leaders. In the episode, Franki Sibberson interviews teacher and author Cris Tovani about her experiences using the workshop model. At the time of the podcast, Tovani was teaching 9th and 11th graders at a school in Colorado. Like Bennett, Tovani also refers to workshop as having "systems and structures" in place (Sibberson, n.d.). Without specifically calling it a "routine", Tovani also describes the daily, unchanging schedule of her classroom that allows students to become familiar with the workshop model: 2-3 minutes at the beginning of class going over

learning targets and how they will be assessed, 10-12 minutes mini-lesson, 40 minutes of work time followed by a 10-minute solo or class debrief (Sibberson, n.d.).

There are two primary focus points in the interview. First, Tovani stresses the importance of conferencing during student work time: "this is the best part and this doesn't matter if you're teaching 1st graders or seniors that conferring allows for that real time feedback – real time feedback is the number one thing that is going to close that achievement gap" (Sibberson, n.d.). This conference time allows the "cycle-within-a cycle" to take place. As students work, the teacher can individually assess and make plans to adjust instruction based on students' needs.

The second focal piece of Tovani's interview was debriefing. She tells Sibberson (n.d.), "Debrief time is huge because it gives them [the students] an opportunity to meta-cognitive about what they worked on…it's also an accountability piece that they know is going to happen at the end of the workshop." This also connects back to the idea of workshop being a structure, system, and routine. Students know every day they will "be expected to share and celebrate the thinking that comes out of the work time" and "it helps them stay on task" (Bennett, 2007, p. 13). As a teacher, this adds the responsibility of making sure to always make time for this debrief to take place.

The final source demonstrates the theoretical aspects of workshop in action in the secondary classroom. In her article "Authentic Literacy Experiences in the Secondary Classroom," Valerie Brunow (2016) gives real insight from her work in shifting her classroom to a workshop model. Brunow (2016) changed the structure of her classroom to meet the needs of her students,"workshop model blends personal interest with approaches to reading and writing that differentiated to meet the needs of a variety of learners" (p. 62). The personal interest piece she describes relates back to the idea of student choice, which sits at the heart of the workshop

theory. Having students reading different texts also allows readers at different levels to challenge themselves accordingly.

Many of the struggles the author describes are common struggles that make the idea of workshop overwhelming and scary to the normal secondary teacher: "working in the high school setting and only having forty minutes per day in an average class of twenty-five—I felt the odds were not in my favor" (Brunow, 2016, p. 65). She later refers to the time factor of applying workshop in the secondary setting as "the art of scheduling." This refers to the idea that while the schedule may vary by day, the core elements—mini-lesson, work-time, debrief—remain unchanged.

Beyond reading engagement, RWW is meant to entice students to write. According to Brunow (2016), "writing about reading is as important as reading itself" (p.68). In order to become better readers, students are asked to read constantly. The same applies to students becoming better writers. To do this, she uses reading journals for students to keep track of mini-lesson notes, as well as, reflection on individual reading and goals (Brunow, 2016, p. 68). In addition, reading journals offer an opportunity for tracking and assessing student progress.

Similar to Tovani, Brunow (2016) stresses the importance of conferencing when implementing the workshop model. While a conference with a student can have a variety of focus points, it should ultimately tie back to making the learning experience more authentic for the learner.

Methodology

To focus the research, two questions regarding the effect of the workshop model were developed to guide implementation, data collection, and data analysis:

1. Does the workshop model help to increase engagement in seniors taking non-college credit English?

2. How does the workshop model impact students' attitudes toward reading?

Specific data sources were chosen to collect data pertaining to each question. For the first question, the researcher collected four engagement surveys and the students' final grades for the semester. For the second question, two additional data sources were collected: two reading interest surveys (one pre-implementation and one post) and the rubric from students' Book Talks. For the two surveys, the researcher gathered whole class data to compare to the participants.

The Setting

The research took place in a high school that serves 9th-12th graders in the Midwest. The school is located in a suburb that is part of a larger metro area. The population of the school is approximately 1600 students, of which approximately 350 are seniors. In addition, 47% of the student body receives free or reduced lunch.

The specific course the research focused on is English Language Arts IV (ELA IV) that is taken by seniors. It fulfills a requirement for graduation as students need four English credits. This course is the only non-college credit English option for 12th graders. The school has eight class periods a day, and the research focused on the 3rd block ELA IV class with 27 students: 17 boys, 10 girls. Two students required special accommodations with 504 Plans. Five students in the class spoke a first language other than English. The students attended ELA IV four days a week: 45 minutes on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday and 88 minutes on Wednesday.

Participants

While whole-class data was collected as a baseline, the research focused on four students in class: two non-college bound students and two college bound.

Student 1 is an African American female who only attended school for two class periods a day to receive her final required credits. Since ELA IV was her first class of the day, she was frequently tardy. After leaving school, she attended a district vocational program. She was a self-expressed "non-reader", and continual conferencing was required throughout the year to identify books of interest for her. Student #1 tended to always turn assignments in, but did not strictly adhere to deadlines. Her final grade first semester was 83%.

Student 2 is a white male who was already enlisted to join the armed forces after graduation. He was often distracted by his phone and missed several days of school for armed forces related training and activities. He enjoyed reading military-themed books and articulated his thoughts well on them. He repeatedly stated he did not enjoy writing and is "not good at it", so those are the assignments he often chose to simply not do. His final grade first semester was 63%.

Student 3 is a white female who planned to attend an in-state university. She was involved in several extra-curricular activities. She consistently functioned at a compliance level of engagement by completing assignments on time and participating in class activities. She functioned well in a leadership role and naturally assumes that position in group work. Her final grade first semester was 90%.

Student 4 is a white male who planned to attend an in-state university. This student severely struggled with his phone in class and was constantly distracted by it. He often chose being "clever" over taking assignments seriously. He lost points during daily reading on a

regular basis for choosing instead to go to the bathroom or be on his phone. His final grade first

semester was 61%.

Implementation

The first priority with deciding the best way to implement the workshop model and

address the research questions was to set a schedule. Students were in class four times a week:

three times for 45 minutes and one time for 88 minutes. The researcher combined and slightly

adjusted the two schedules Kelly Gallager & Penny Kittle (2018) laid out in *180 Days*. Outlined

below is how the class time was structured to give students autonomy and implement the three

core elements of the workshop model: mini-lesson, student work-time, and debrief.

Table 1

Modified Schedule

Monday (45 minute class)	Tuesday (45 minute class)	Wednesday (88 minute class)	Friday (45 minute class)
2-5 minutes: Book Talks	**2-5 minutes:** Book Talks	**2-5 minutes:** book Talks	**2-5 minutes:** book Talks
10 minutes: independent reading	**10 minutes:** independent reading	**15 minutes:** independent reading	**10 minutes:** independent reading
NO INDEPENDENT WRITING TIME	NO INDEPENDENT WRITING TIME	**10 minutes:** independent writing	NO INDEPENDENT WRITING TIME
10-15 minutes: mini-lesson	NO MINI-LESSON	**10-15 minutes:** mini-lesson	**8-10 minutes:** mini lesson
20 minutes: work-time	**25 minutes:** work time (carried over from Monday's mini-lesson)	**30-35 minutes:** work time	**20 minutes:** worktime
NO DEBRIEF	**5 minutes:** debrief	**5-8 minutes:** debrief	**2-3 minutes:** debrief

This was a practice the researcher began implementing in pieces at the beginning of the second semester that began in January 2019. It was fully implemented by March 4, 2019.

To gather baseline data, a reading interest survey was administered on March 1, 2019. This survey was re-administered on May 3, 2019. This data tracked students' changing (or unchanging) attitudes once the classroom was fully immersed in the workshop model. An example of this survey can be found in Appendix A.

The week of March 4-8 was the first full week of workshop implementation.

The week of March 11-15 the researcher administered the first engagement survey during a Monday class period. For all of the engagement surveys, the researcher used an adapted form from Jim Knight's (2017) *The Impact Cycle: What Instructional Coaches Should Do to Foster Improvements in Teaching*. An example can be found in Appendix B. Knight's (2017) survey involves students rating themselves on a scale of 1-7: one being non-compliant, 4 being compliant, and 7 being engaged. Every ten minutes, the timer went off that signaled students to mark his or her engagement level at that moment. Each time the timer went off, the researcher marked on a sheet what the students were doing at that moment.

The week of March 18-22, a second engagement survey was administered on a Wednesday class period.

The week of March 25-29 was the district's spring break, and the students were only in session two days that week. The week of April 1-5 included "Super Test Day" for the school. No engagement surveys were administered this week.

The week of April 8-12 a third engagement survey was administered on a Tuesday class period.

The week of April 15-19 a fourth engagement survey was administered on a Friday class period.

Overall, during the implementation, the researcher found students responded positively to the routine by actively participating and were engaged during independent reading and writing time. Students also willingly participated in multiple surveys.

The primary threat to the implementation of this strategy was student attendance. Spring break for the district was originally scheduled for March 22-31, which was shortened to March 27-31 due to snow days. The class experienced significant absences on the days originally scheduled for spring break. The researcher planned ahead of time not to collect data during that week.

In addition, two students in the class dropped out of school, and one student, who was one of the original participants, received a long-term suspension.

Analysis of Findings

For the first research question regarding whether or not the workshop model increased engagement in seniors taking non-college credit English, two data sources were collected. First, students participated in engagement surveys on four different days once the workshop model had been fully implemented. Consistently with the participants and the class as a whole, engagement was highest during times of student choice. Specifically, students were most engaged during independent reading time and Sacred Writing Time (a practice where students are asked to write for ten minutes about anything).There was also consistently an above-compliant engagement level during work-time that took up the bulk of the class.

The participants' scores lined up with the class averages by rating engagement highest during independent reading or Sacred Writing Time. There was not a major discrepancy between non-college bound and college-bound participants.

The second data source for the first research question was students' final grades from the semester. An increased engagement level would, in theory, lead to a better grade. The table below shows a comparison between the two semesters. Students 1, 3, and 4 raised their final grades by percentage points, but not a whole letter. Student 2's grade stayed the same.

Table 2

Participant Final Grade Comparison

	Final Grade 1st Semester (Pre-Implementation)	Final Grade 2nd Semester (Post-Implementation)
Student 1	83%	86%
Student 2	63%	63%
Student 3	90%	92%
Student 4	61%	65%

For the second research question regarding the effect of the workshop model on students' attitudes toward reading, two data sources were collected: reading interest surveys and Book Talk rubrics.

Reading interest surveys were adapted from examples given in Penny Kittle's *Book Love: Developing Depth Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent readers.* Kittle (2013) created the survey with the intention of helping teachers get to know how their students viewed themselves as readers. The survey was administered prior to implementation and after the workshop model had

been fully implemented. The survey asked students to rate the validity of a statement on a scale

of 1 or "never" to 10 or "always." Students responded to eight statements, but the researcher only

focused on three statements pertained to a students' attitude toward reading.

Figure 1 shows the statement "I read in my free time" saw a class average decrease.

However, the four participants either increased the score or stayed the same. If students are

reading in their free time, this suggests an improved, positive attitude toward the practice.
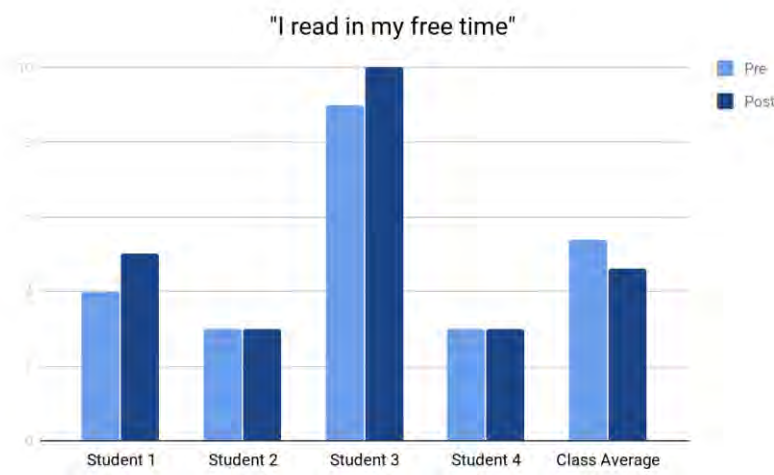

Figure 1: Reading Interest Survey Response #1

Figure 2 shows the statement "I enjoy reading" saw a class average increase, while the

participants also increased or stayed the same. An increased enjoyment of reading reflects an

increase in positive attitude.
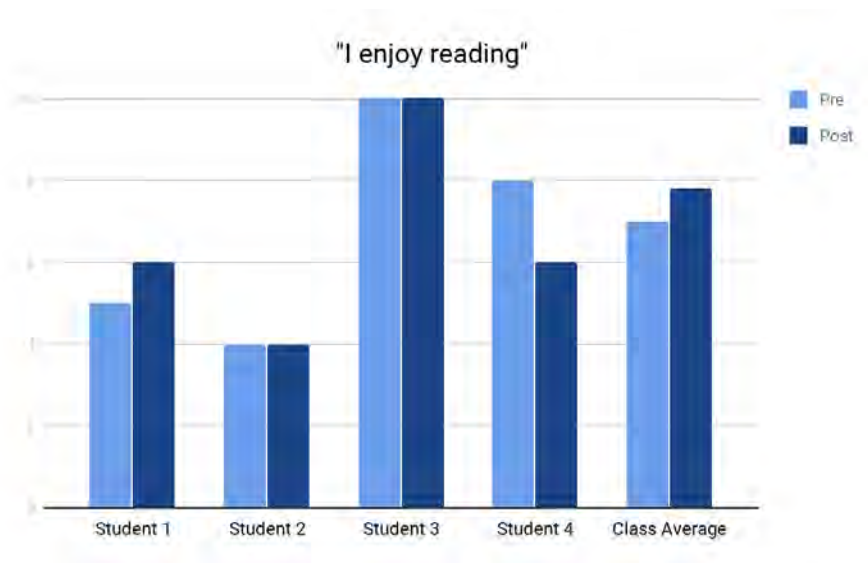
Figure 2: Reading Interest Survey Response #2

Finally, Figure 3 shows the final statement "I fake read in school" saw a slight class average decrease. Students 1, 2, and 3 followed this trend by decreasing or staying the same; however, Student 4 rated his faking reading as more frequent. This suggests an overall class increase in enjoyment, as well as engagement, in the reading practice.
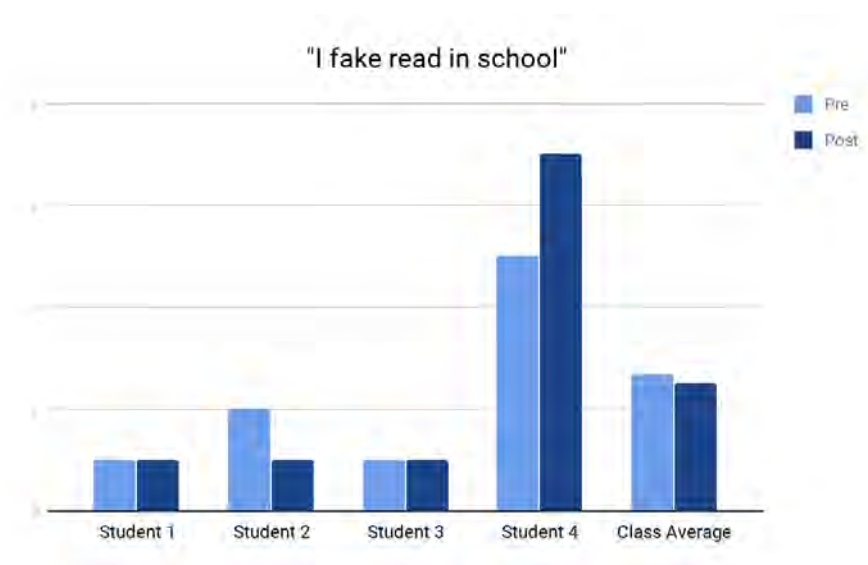

Figure 3: Reading Interest Survey Response #3

The second piece of data collected for the second research question was the rubrics from student Book Talks. A copy of the rubric can be found in Appendix C. Each student was required to give one Book Talk or a short presentation, each semester over a book they had read during that time. This was first modeled by the researcher and served as a way of holding students accountable for independent reading. Kittle (2013) cited the importance of Book Talks to the workshop model because it exposes students to a variety of authors and styles.

The specific criteria the research looked at on the rubric was "Demonstrates enthusiasm for the book." Students 1, 2, and 3 scored the highest rating possible of "Excellent." This suggests they had a positive experience reading if they were able to convey enthusiasm to the class. Student 4 was not prepared and did not present a Book Talk, so there is no data for him. There could potentially be a correlation between his increased frequency of fake reading and being unprepared to present a book.

The purpose of the action research was to gauge the effectiveness of the workshop model at the secondary level, specifically in regards to student engagement and attitude. Overall, the data answered these questions.

The first research question asked, "Does the workshop model help to increase engagement in seniors taking non-college credit English?" The data suggests that it does. As mentioned above, students ranked their engagement at higher levels during independent reading, free writing, and work-time. These "student centered" times are at the heart of the workshop model. In addition, none of the participants saw a decrease in their grades after the workshop model; in fact, three of the four increased their final grades by a few percentage points compared to the first semester. Increased engagement with the model led to more learning taking place.

The second research question asked, "How does the workshop model impact students' attitudes toward reading?" Based on the pre and post-implementation reading interest survey, the students' enjoyment of reading went up and their time spent "fake reading" went down. These trends can be credited to a more positive attitude toward the practice.

In addition, Students 1, 2, and 3 delivered Book Talks and scored highly on the criteria "demonstrates enthusiasm for the book." Being able to show enthusiasm can be correlated with a positive experience reading. The more positive experiences students have with a practice the more positive their attitude toward practice will be. This suggests the workshop model has a positive impact on a students' attitude toward reading.

However, data from Student 4 did not always align with the rest of the class or with the other participants. He rated his enjoyment level of reading increasing, but his time spent "fake reading" in school also increased. In addition, he was not prepared and was unable to present his Book Talk to the class. A correlation can be drawn between his increased "fake reading" and inability to present on a book he read. This suggests the workshop model is not a "one size fits all" for students.

Conclusions: What Next?

This action research showed taking a step back and giving students more autonomy and control can have powerful results. Students were most engaged in times when they had choice: independent reading, Sacred Writing, and work-time. While at times it was challenging for the researcher to keep the mini-lesson to 10-15 minutes, it allowed the students more time for practice and the teacher more time to work one-on-one or in small group situations.

In addition, the research showed the workshop model can be modified to a secondary classroom with varying class times. The adapted schedule used in the research maintained the components of the workshop cycle and still included time for independent reading and writing. Overall, students benefit from having and knowing the schedule of their class and were able to adapt to and succeed in the different set-up of RWW.

The researcher recommends the workshop model be considered as a viable option for secondary English classrooms. In addition, the researcher saw improvements once students became familiar with the structure of RWW and recommends students become exposed to the model in elementary and middle school. Their familiarity with the process could increase its effectiveness at the secondary level.

The next step for the researcher is to fully implement the workshop model in all classrooms regardless of grade-level, to better utilize readers-writers' journals, and to find a method to better track conference data. If further research were conducted, the researcher would like to focus on the following questions:

- How does the workshop model affect students' attitudes toward writing?

- Does student performance and engagement increase if they experience the workshop model in multiple classrooms (not just English)?

- What impact does the workshop model have on specific skills such as reading fluency and comprehension?

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Appendix A

Adapted from Kittle, P. (2013). *Book love: developing depth, stamina, and passion in adolescent readers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Name_____

	1 Never	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 always
I read in my free time.										
I enjoy reading.										
I finish the books I start.										
I "fake read" in school.										
Reading is hard for me.										
When I read, I sometimes forget where I am in the story or on the page.										
I read regularly.										
I will choose to read a challenging book.										

Appendix B

Adapted from Knight, J. (2017). *The impact cycle: what instructional coaches should do to foster improvements in teaching*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

ENGAGEMENT FORM

Date: _____

Instructions: Each time you hear the bell, please rate how engaging the learning activity is in which you are involved. You are only to rate whether or not the learning activity is engaging for you.

NONCOMPLIANT			COMPLIANT			ENGAGED
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix C

Created by Stephanie Nagl

Book Talk Rubric

Criteria	Excellent 4	Average 3	Developing 2	Below Average 1
Introduction attracts audience	Exceptional creative beginning	Creative beginning	Not a very creative or interesting beginning	Not a very good beginning
Maintains eye contact	Always maintains eye contact and engages audience	Almost always maintains eye contact	Sometimes maintains eye contact	Never maintains eye contact
Discusses the plot, setting, and characters	Thorough and interesting summary of these elements.	Somewhat thorough and interesting summary of these elements	Average summary of the elements	Does not summarize these elements or is missing a component.
Reads an excerpt from the book	Demonstrates a particularly thoughtful approach to the passage selected to read aloud	Some evidence of a thoughtful approach to the passage selected to read aloud	Little evidence of a thoughtful approach to the passage selected to read aloud	No evidence of a thoughtful approach to the passage selected to read aloud or passage is not read at all
Conclusion makes us want to read the book (or not read the book)	Very enticing conclusion – draws the listener to read the book	Somewhat interesting conclusion- listener might want to read the book	Concluded but did not draw the listener to read the book	Very boring conclusion or no conclusion at all
Demonstrates enthusiasm for book	Very enthusiastic and knowledgeable	Somewhat enthusiastic and knowledgeable	Shows average enthusiasm and understanding	Not enthusiastic at all
Audible	Voice is clear, words are pronounced correctly and tempo is good.	Voice is mostly clear and audible, Pronunciation is mostly correct.	Sometimes hard to understand or hear the student Mispronounces common words.	Spoken word is too soft, mumble, speaking much too fast or slow
Stays within time	Within 2:00-4:30 minutes	Over or under by 15 seconds or less	Over or under by 16- 30 seconds	Too short or too long

Comments:

Total: _____/32