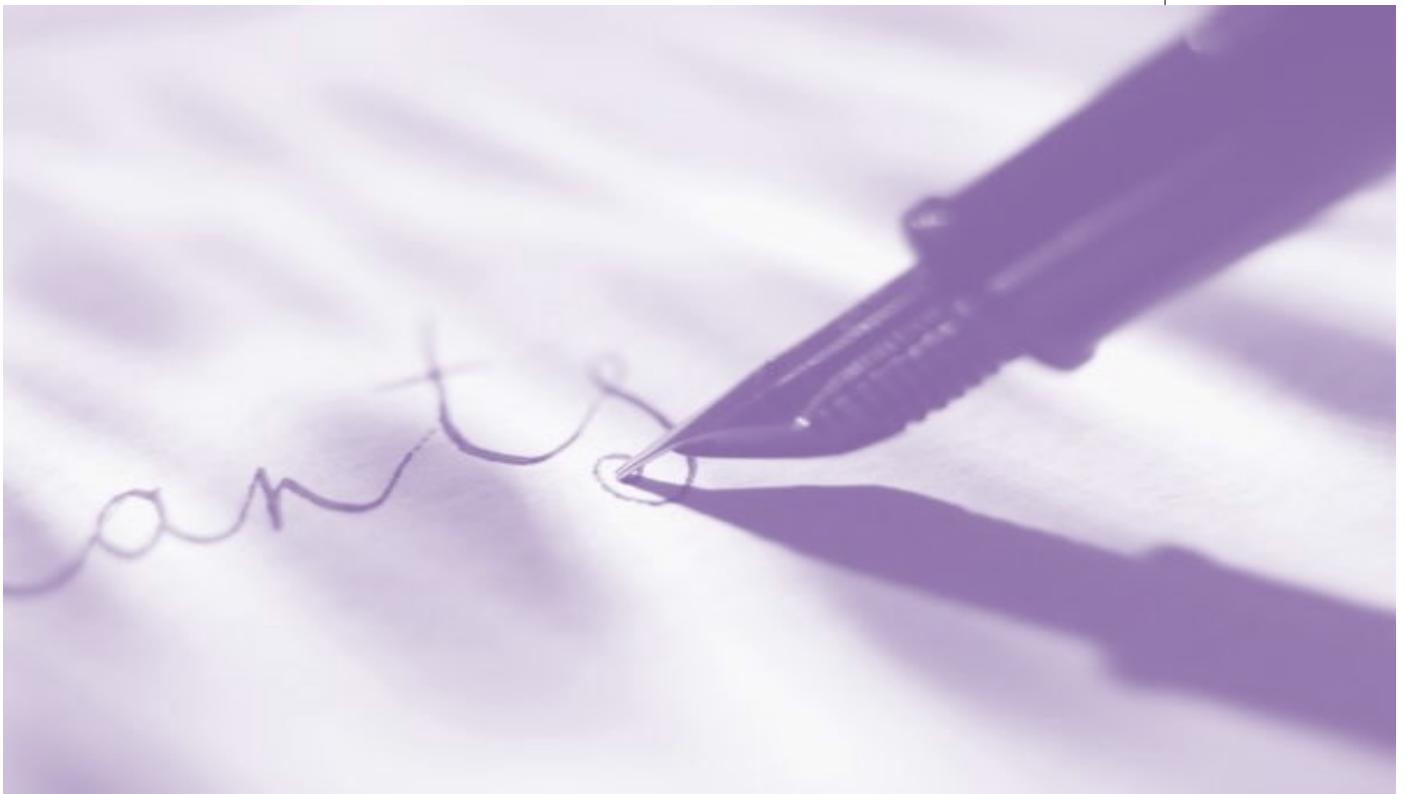


# Eastern Illinois Writing Project

Summer Institute 2016



I-Search Research Anthology

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# Writing Activities & Assignments for the Social Studies Classroom

## Nathan Anastas

### Introduction

I have been a teacher for eight years. I have used writing assignments in my classes in the past, but I have never really been proud of any of them. I want students to complete quality, worthwhile, and easy to understand writing assignments in every one of my classes. I also want these writing assignments to be fairly and objectively graded. Finally, I want these assignments to be frequent. I don't want writing activities or assignments to be unusual or out- of- the- norm. I don't know much about how to teach or grade writing. I'm a complete novice, really. I know how to write, and I can tell students if their work is well written, but I am unable to give any lessons about grammar, sentence structure, or the structure of an overall paper. All I do know is that writing is incredibly important and should be a component of nearly every class on a student's schedule.

These are the questions I would like to answer:

1. How do you fairly and objectively grade writing assignments?
2. How do you assist students who doubt their writing skills complete worthwhile writing assignments?
3. How can teachers outside of the ELA field authentically incorporate writing assignments into their classes?
4. What sort of writing assignments work best in social studies elective classes?

Internet searches should be able to provide me with enough information to answer my research questions. Most major colleges and universities have some sort of online writing lab where high level educators post and share resources related to writing. I am not an expert in this field, but I know there are plenty of academics who have dedicated their careers to the teaching and assessment of writing. These experts often make their work available online, it's just a matter of me finding it.

Textbooks and manuals on teacher instruction and training will also be a valuable source. College students that pursue a degree in teaching are often required to read books that contain writing strategies and example activities. Hopefully some of these texts will contain information directly related to incorporating writing into Social Studies classes. Writing assignments should help move my classroom from a "teacher centered" model to a more "student centered one. That would make my job less stressful and eliminate some performance anxiety from the daily grind of teaching. Also, it would give my students an opportunity to practice writing in classes outside of the ELA field. Finally, my students could have the opportunity to delve deep into topics that would otherwise be left underserved in my classroom.

### The Search

First source: The WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) Journal (<http://wac.colostate.edu/journal/>)  
From this source I learned that the push to teach writing "across the curriculum" goes back to at least the late 1980's. The first issue of the WAC journal was published in the summer of 1989.

This source I also moved me to realize that I truly am a novice when it comes to writing and the teaching of writing. The WAC contained a lot of stuff, and most of it was over my head. I did not find this source to be helpful. Honestly, I felt like the articles written for the WAC were simply over my head. I could read the titles of the articles, but nothing else made any sense. I did feel like this source was a waste of time. First, as I already stated, the WAC journal was simply over my head. Second, it appeared that most of the submissions for the WAC journal are for teaching writing at college and graduate levels. I'm a highschool teacher.

Second source: Across the Disciplines: A Journal of Language, Learning, and Academic Writing (<http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/>)

There was no reason for me to even open the articles featured in the most recent issue of this journal. Why? Because I KNEW they were going to be waaaaay over my head. Here's an example: Multimodal Communication in the University: Surveying Faculty Across Disciplines. Here's another example: Using Corpus- based Instruction to Explore Writing Variation Across the Disciplines: A Case History in a Graduate- level Technical Editing Course. These articles clearly weren't written for high school teachers, and they were clearly out of my league.

No, this source was not helpful. My quest was to find simple, generic, easily adaptable writing assignments and activities to use in a high school social studies class. This journal contained articles that were written for a very different purpose. Yes, looking at this source was a waste of time. I'm sure it would have been useful to an academic who wanted to do very thorough research on the use of writing in colleges and universities, but that was not my purpose. I was not the target audience for the articles collected in this journal.

Third Source: The WAC Clearinghouse Teaching Exchange (<http://wac.colostate.edu/teaching/>)

This source broke the trend of duds. The previous sources hadn't been at fault or poorly constructed, they simply did not suite my needs. This one was different. Instead of academic articles about writing across curriculum and studies done for colleges and universities, this source had a collection of web links to lesson plans, class activities, formal writing assignments, and even full course syllabi. Here are a few of the more helpful and/or interesting assignments and activities:

- "Walk- Through" Mini- Research Project
  - <http://wac.colostate.edu/teaching/fullitem.cfm?itemID=20>
- Small collection of informal, in- class writing activities
  - <http://wac.colostate.edu/teaching/fullitem.cfm?itemID=43>
- Using Writing as Thinking: Question - Hypothesis - Question
  - <http://wac.colostate.edu/teaching/fullitem.cfm?itemID=42>

Yes, this source was very helpful. Not all, but most, of the assignments or activities featured in this source could be used in any classroom on any day. The layout of the site wasn't pretty, and the navigation tools weren't fantastic, but the content was quite helpful. Looking forward, I think the only thing that might prevent me from using these sources is lack of confidence. I would need to be a bit brave, overcome my own fears about writing, and simply do it.

Looking at this source was not a waste of time. The source's boring, ugly, and unfriendly layout made using the source very inconvenient, but still very worthwhile. I was actually quite happy that this source was helpful, because the first two sources I investigated were not. Three unhelpful sources in a row would have been very devastating to my morale.

Fourth source: Writing In Social Studies: Baltimore County Public Schools

([http://www.bcps.org/offices/lis/writing/secondary/wac\\_ss.html](http://www.bcps.org/offices/lis/writing/secondary/wac_ss.html))

This source provided quite a few useful ideas associated with the teaching of writing in Social Studies classes. The site itself appeared to have been created by a school district- wide Social Studies department as a warehouse for storing techniques teachers could use in their classes. It was not a well organized or visually appealing source, but it did contain quite a few resources, activities, and assignments.

Yes, this source was helpful. The main page of the Social Studies section contained summaries of at least nine different writing strategies/assignments. Each of these strategies was accompanied by links to all the the instructional and assessment tools needed to implement the technique. All of the strategies that I browsed appeared to be generic; meaning they could be applied to any topic in any Social Studies class.

While looking at this source wasn't a waste of time, I do feel like I wasted quite a bit of time *trying* to look at the source. The source was incredibly ugly and featured an outdated, user- unfriendly interface. All of the content for the source was arranged on incredibly long pages with inadequate indexing and/or searching tools. This, strangely, seemed to be a common theme amongst all of the electronic sources I found.

Fifth source: Content- Area Writing: Every Teacher's Guide (Daniels, Harvey, Steven Zemelman, and Nancy Steineke. *Content- area Writing: Every Teacher's Guide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007. Print.)

First, I learned that the internet isn't the only place to find information regarding the study and teaching of writing. I suppose I already knew this, but needed a firm reminder nonetheless. Second, I learned that there are quite a few assignments, exercises, and activities that can be used in any classroom related to writing. The book's subtitle, "Every Teacher's Guide", was incredibly appropriate. The techniques presented in the book were not, in any way, locked to a single content area. They were all generic and could be used in any classroom.

Yes, this source was incredibly helpful. The bulk of the text focused on Eighteen different writing activities/strategies. Some of the activities were simple, quick, and incredibly easy for any teacher to implement in any classroom. Towards the end of the list the activities were a bit more intense.

I would like to focus on one of these more advanced techniques for a moment: the I- Search paper.

First, it is important to note that this document has been written as an I- Search paper. An I- Search paper is a narrative approach to research. Many of the skills used in writing a more traditional research paper are carried over, but there are a few differences. An I- Search paper puts a great deal of emphasis on the writer's research journey. The author of an I- Search paper develops a research question, hunts for answers and resources, and narrates their experience. Less emphasis is placed on the use of prose and structure that often cause students to feel frustration and stress.

Second, I feel that this was easily the best writing strategy/assignment/technique that I encountered. I- Search papers are easy to write since they don't focus on complicated prose or structure. They place the entirety of their focus on research and discovery. Any student, regardless of their writing ability, should be able to write an I- Search paper. Finally, I know I am going to implement I- Search papers in all of the classes I teach in the future.

No, looking at this source was not a waste of time. The first four sources I investigated all had the same problem: they were poorly designed and unpleasant websites. This source was a book, it was neatly organized and easy to navigate. When looking at the websites I felt confused, frustrated, and quickly lost interest. When looking at this book I felt none of those things.

## Conclusion

At times my search was frustrating and unproductive, but ultimately I accomplished my mission. I came away from the search with several resources, strategies, and generic assignments that could be implemented in any Social Studies class. I found the I- Search paper method to be particularly appealing, and I felt that almost any class could be enhanced with its inclusion.

I was amazed by the amount of material available on the topic. Before beginning the research, I knew that there would be no shortage of online resources. I was unprepared for the sheer amount of resources, though. My mind was boggled. Many of the resources were not useful, though. This was not their fault. The resources were not useful because I, personally, was not fluent or experienced enough to understand their true value. I knew that the teaching of writing would be difficult, and I also knew that my novice status would present an obstacle to my quest. Thankfully, this obstacle was overcome and I did make several useful discoveries.

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27 June 2016

### Quick and Ready to Go

#### *Background*

It literally looked like a tornado passed through. I had only been hired the day before and class started in two days. My classroom was a disaster! My predecessor left things everywhere. After an entire year in the classroom, I still haven't found all of the materials, gone through all of the file cabinets, or even determined what system (if any) was used to file. In sum, I needed help! I had seven preps and no ready-to-go materials.

At the end of the year, I thought I was doing great and that the next year would be better. I am now familiar with *most* of the resources and thought I had a good road map for the year. Then the administration dropped a bomb on me! My curriculum and schedule are being completely restructured. Now I am back to square one. My goal for this year is to create more collaborative projects for the students and to create more technology-driven, less traditional instructional opportunities (a challenge - my school seems to be stuck technologically in the '90s). At the end of the school year I was overwhelmed with the idea of creating a curriculum for my new, very complicated schedule that will now include two dual-credit classes.

*In the Beginning. . .*

I thought I was pretty familiar with research papers and the tried and true methods of research review, especially self-review. What had I done? Annotations? Check! Bibliographies? Check! Reviews? Check! But what other approaches to examining the research process are there? The I-Search paper is a new concept for me. Honestly, I struggled a bit with understanding the concept. Once the light bulb turned on though, I became excited. Now the question was, what do I research. For what may be the first time in my academic career, someone wants me to write a paper that will genuinely benefit me on a daily basis. So, naturally I decide to look into “things” that will make restructuring my curriculum easier. But what? When you start from scratch, there is an endless number of options to help make things go more smoothly.

I started my narrowing process by determining efficacy of the researched items. How can I “get the most bang for my buck?” I went through several options. First, my thought was to research ready-made lessons that I could adopt and apply without much effort in my classes. My problem here is that I have always had difficulty finding sites with consistent results or that support a wide variety of materials. I decided I might change my approach and research technology applications in my classroom, but our system is so old I wasn’t sure whether this was the appropriate approach to take. In the end, I did what many do and tested the waters for both.

### *The Process*

After I got over my hesitancy about this project, particularly about not providing an argument, I jumped right in with both feet. I really didn’t know where to start, so I looked through some of the texts from the Summer Institute. I found many ideas that might be helpful, but nothing that gave me an “Aha!” moment. I attempted to use my smart phone to complete the research, but was very limited by my lack of access to a desktop with high-speed internet. I just have too poor of service at home and am not near WIFI.

I suspected from the beginning that the best resources I might find would be on the internet. Easy access and quick reproducibility in my classroom were key goals at the outset. I had a vague notion of what I wanted to research, so I started in with the intention of narrowing the field by a simple process of elimination based on the volume of search returns.

When I started out, I thought I might get the best of both worlds with the website that I constantly see on commercials (we only get PBS, which is great!). I looked into PBS Learning Media



(pbslearningmedia.org). There were some great items to use, but there just wasn't the *volume* that I am searching for. After posting in my blog on d2l, Dr. Murray responded and helped steer me in a different direction, more toward the ready-made lessons (Murray).

After coming to the conclusion that I needed to narrowly focus on ready-produced lessons, I found it necessary to determine the criteria for inclusion. So what do I really need? First, the site and contents must be *free*! My budget for classroom expenses just doesn't exist. Second, the site must contain enough lessons that I can use it on multiple occasions and hopefully for multiple content areas. Finally, the site must be easy to access and search.

What did I find when searching? Most sites don't fulfill all three of these criteria. Sites generally had very few lessons and/or linked to outside sources for the lessons they did have. I was most surprised by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) site. It was one that had very few lessons and they were click-through links to other sites. The second site that I checked, of the many that came up in the search results, was *Discovery Education*. I hoped that this resource would be very beneficial. My school subscribes to Discovery and I have full access to the site. However, I was disappointed. There were very few lessons available and they were generally of fairly poor quality (*Discovery Education*). I checked that box and moved on.

After moving past these dry wells, I finally started to quench my curiosity with a few sites. The next site, *Hot Chalk: Lesson Plans Page: Lesson Plans by Teachers for Teachers*, seemed much more likely to provide meaningful and useful resources. It is free and easily searchable. It also has a large number of lessons. However, it would be difficult to transform these lessons, even just a few, into a cohesive unit. The lessons are very random and not necessarily thematically related. So, put this one on a shelf as a possible resource, but it's not likely to be the real "go-to" (*Hot Chalk*). For the same reasons the Utah Education Network site will go to the same place. It's less searchable, but it has a few good lessons, especially for *The Crucible*, a play that we cover in English III (*UEN*).

The next site I checked out was *sharemylesson*. This site is very attractive and looks very searchable. It has all of the right filters and tons of returns on searches. However, one of the problems is that the filters don't seem to work. Many of the returns should have been filtered out. Also, you have to register to get the content (*sharemylesson*). I usually avoid sites like this, finding that they end up not being that

useful and fill your inbox with junk. While I would like to add this to the shelf, I think it joins NCTE and Discovery in the rubbish bin. However, I will reevaluate later, probably when I have hit a creative wall, because it is sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers (*sharemylesson*).

The next site I checked was *Betterlesson*. It joins *HotChalk* and *UEN* in the list that has a few useful lessons, but isn't a really reliable resource. *Betterlesson* particularly does not provide a very functional search feature. Sources are not arranged by unit or theme (*Betterlesson*). After coming to the conclusion that most of the sites above, including *Betterlesson*, were of limited use, I asked Dr. Murray for suggestions.

At long last, using Dr. Murray's suggestion, I finally found a site that was all I was searching for! With *readwritethink* NCTE has redeemed itself! This website is very searchable, has a large number of lessons, and allows for the easy creation of units. While it does not really cross the content-area divide outside of English Language Arts, it is an awesome tool in that area. This site will easily be my go-to for ideas and resources for ELA. It's large content and forthcoming standard alignments make it a great resource. So, in sum, it is free, it's searchable, and it's extensive, meaning I will use it all the time! While it is not directly a part of the NCTE site, NCTE is a sponsor, validating my earlier assumption that they would be a great place to start (*readwritethink*).

While I checked out many other sites, these most nearly cleaved to what I sought to research. Some were not user friendly and others were clearly commercialized. These make the list because they either met, or seemed like they should meet, most of the criteria and can provide a representative example of the field.

### *Conclusion*

It is difficult to write a true conclusion about my research process because there is not much of an argument to be made from the sources, but rather about the sources. The most telling result was the lack of *useful* results. Many sites have a limited number of useful lessons or ideas, if any at all. Several are pay-as-you-go and as such did not meet the most critical criterion and thus did not even make it in to discussion. Nearly all of the lessons from any site will need modification based on their direct or intended uses. That said, no site even comes close to *readwritethink* in terms of searchability, user-friendliness, and sheer volume. The greatest success from this project was the discovery of that site and its possible ramifications

for simplifying my over-busy classroom prepping. In the end, *readwritethink* was exactly the tool I was looking for.

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#### A Writing Curriculum That Works

I've always struggled teaching writing, simply because I'm unsure what to teach, when to teach, and let's face it... I employ a lack of confidence in the actual teaching of it. I always plan for writing time, and even write something down that we will be working on. But, honestly it is the first thing to be thrown out the window if I don't have enough time in the day.

The writing instruction our team has mostly focused on in my career of teaching third graders revolved mostly around reading response activities. While this is an important part of learning, it's not the only type of writing my students should be doing, according to the standards. In addition, our way of teaching it is very "cookie cutter", leaving little room for creativity.

As the school year came to a close this year, we were informed that our focus for the 2016-17 school year was going to be improving our writing instruction. So, as we exited the building the last school day before summer break, our administrator gave the kindergarten through third grade teachers a new writing curriculum, *Lucy Calkins Units of Study*, to be implemented in the coming school year. This was my chance, there's no better time to extinguish my burning anxiety when it comes to writing instruction.

While I am super excited to have a guide, I'm also very unsure of how to make it fit into my very rigorous math and reading packed school day. I know that reading and writing go hand in hand, as they do across all the subject areas, but fitting in an actual forty-five minutes to an hour a day to teach just writing overwhelms me. So, I began to look at creating a curriculum map. It was my hope to look at how I can implement the new writing program, while connecting directly with my reading curriculum. I began with browsing through Lucy Calkins' *A Guide to the Common Core Writing Workshop* with hopes of getting an idea of how to set up the schedule, and make it fit into my day. While reading, I came across so many great ideas and things to try, that at times, I was overwhelmed. But, something I kept seeing was that teachers need to practice what they teach (of course, but I don't always do it), and that writing for students has to be done daily. With the Lucy Calkins curriculum, from what I've read, students are writing every day. They will not complete pieces each day or even each week, but they are writing daily. According to Calkins (2013), "Writing needs to be taught like any other basic skill, with explicit instruction and ample opportunity for practice. Almost every day, every student in grades K-5 needs between fifty and sixty minutes for writing instruction and writing" (p. 19). As I was reading this, I began to realize

that just fitting it in here and there integrated with my reading curriculum was just not going to be enough. I also found that I was beginning to get excited to teach writing again! I say "again", but if I'm being honest I'd say to begin teaching writing! I couldn't wait to dig in deeper to see how I am going to make this work.

Creating this curriculum map or guide, for me, felt so important. What does that mean for me? The same thing it means for my students... It has to be meaningful! With that in mind, I realized that there's smaller pieces that I needed to look at to complete the puzzle. So, I continued to read about exactly what a writing workshop would look like. In Calkins' curriculum, she uses the workshop model for instructing students in writing. She and many others believe that "our goal is to actively and explicitly teach students how to draw on a repertoire of skills and strategies that have served accomplished writers well over the years" (p.26). In order to provide this type of instruction she recommends the demonstrate, scaffold, then release to write approach. This approach is exactly how the writing workshop is set up. Since I have the curriculum lined out for me, I decided to follow this model of writing instruction using the writing workshop. It was clear to me that the curriculum map, while still important, was going to have to wait. I knew I didn't want to completely forget about it, but understanding this way of teaching writing was going to have to come first. So, I began to familiarize myself with the management of the workshop schedule.

During my research on the workshop model I found many reasons why this was an effective way of teaching. All of them reassuring my idea that this was the way I wanted to teach writing in my classroom. Doing writing workshop daily is going to ensure that my students will be writing every day. This was definitely a step in the right direction from my current teaching modality. Daniels, Zemelman, and Steineke (2007) point out that it also allows me, as the teacher, to see exactly what skills individuals are struggling with, in real time, through conferencing with

students (p.187). Also, I found that during the minilessons, because I will be teaching techniques, I can tailor that instruction to exactly what my students need. It's not necessarily theme oriented. It seems that using the writer's workshop method will make my teaching more efficient and worthwhile for my students.

The workshop model begins by teaching a minilesson. According to Calkins (2013), "Minilessons are meant as intervals for explicit, brief instruction in skills and strategies that then become part of a writer's repertoire, to be drawn on as needed" (p.60) The mini lesson will last no longer than 15 minutes. During this time it is important to for me to establish a connection. This is the time in the lesson where students get to be involved briefly by discussing with a partner. After a brief time, the demonstration portion of the minilesson begins. I will "demonstrate something that the youngsters are also imagining themselves doing" (Calkins, 2013, p. 51). Next, students will be invited to actively engage with the lesson. I will offer opportunities for them to practice what I've done with a partner, while still in the meeting area.

Following the minilesson, students will be sent off to have work time or writing time. During this time students will be required to write the entire time. They may be working on the skill that I taught in the minilesson, writing a story, or revising a story they already started; as long as they are writing. While students are writing, I will be conferring with individual students or working with small groups of students that need work on the same skill. From my experience, and from my research, I have found that this type of interaction with students gives me the opportunity to provide individualized, meaningful feedback to foster growth and learning in my students.

To complete our workshop time, I will allow the students an opportunity to share a piece of their work. It may or may not be what they worked on that day, just something they feel confident

in sharing. Students may share with a partner, group, or whole class. One teacher suggests that this is a good time for the teacher to choose an exemplar sample for a student to share, or for the students to choose to share something that they want peer feedback on (“How to Run a Successful Writer’s Workshop”, 2015). Share time is also an opportunity for me to remind students of strategies they are seeing their peers use in their writing. This is the step I can see myself leaving out because of time restrictions, but such a crucial part in the process. I will make this part of the workshop fit into my schedule to help my students build confidence in their abilities as writers.

So, walking out of the school building that last school day in May, I was frightened and worried about how I was going to make this new writing curriculum work for my students and me. I am so grateful, as I have begun exploring Lucy Calkins' Units of Study I have found that she has come up with the "then what". Her curriculum has set up a clear guide and schedule of how writing instruction can be delivered to students to maximize their learning and foster a love of writing. I now have a clear idea of what my writing block will look like, and I feel more confident in teaching it.

Throughout my teaching career, I have learned that all aspects of the school day need to be simple and predictable. Students need routines to help them be independent and productive. It's the little things that make a classroom a conducive environment for learning, and these ideas and expectations have to be known days or even weeks before students walk into the room. Setting up writer’s workshop in my classroom will be no different. I have already begun looking for resources to help me teach the everyday procedures to my students from the very beginning, so that my writing block will run smoothly.

In addition to determining what my first few weeks will look like, I will be looking further into the curriculum, and begin familiarizing myself with the units of study. I know that I will need

mentor texts and sample writing for my lessons, so I want to begin collecting those for the upcoming school year. Anchor charts are also used in many of the lessons in the curriculum, so I want to prepare those ahead of time, as much as possible. While I know my writing instruction won't be flawless, with all of these things in place, I'll have a great base to start from.

My research has created for me exactly what I had hoped. With every turn this inquiry took, I dove deeper into what it all meant for me. Each step led to another, and like many other things in my career it hasn't stopped. There's always a next step, but sometimes I give up looking for it or move on to something else. This has all snowballed into something wonderful. I finally have a clear idea of what I want to do with writing instruction.

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Melissa Etchison

### **Introduction**

Imagine walking into a classroom and being given the following prompt. "Write a paragraph concerning what you did over summer break." Would you be excited or reluctant? Do you freak out or are you calm? Do you like to write? Many students do not like to write. The question is why do they not like to write? It is the teacher's job to find the connection between the student and the writing world.



My research question was “How to get reluctant writers to want to write?” My interest in the answer to this question is because I would like to reach more students in my classes in the area of written language. This topic was chosen for my I-search paper because it is a concern I have for my English classes. I know how important writing is for the four years of high school and the adult world. The written language strategies that I have been using are not connecting well with the majority of the students. I want to find “fresh” strategies/methods to reach students who do not like to write. I need to improve the writing component of my classes to assist in the writing skills of my students. I have had trouble getting some students to “buy” in to the importance of writing in all areas of life. It is like a challenge to get them to want to write and enjoy it.

As I proceeded through my research the following were the questions that I was trying to answer. “What are some research-based strategies that I can put in place in my classroom that will get the students connected to the written language of real life?” “How can I get my students to ‘enjoy’ writing and not feel the dread?” I enjoyed this research because I want to be a better teacher in the area of writing. This research will allow me to put fresh strategies/methods in place to reach more students. I want them to reach in and find the want to write both in personal and school writing. I did find the answer to my questions. The answer is to find new strategies to put into place so the students are turned on about writing. I have found some strategies/methods to use in my classroom that will help to get my reluctant writers to write better and more often.

During this paper, I will be dividing my findings into three main divisions. First, I will introduce you to some basic information about writing including the writing process. Second, I will explain some information about reluctant writers. Finally, I will introduce you to strategies/methods to assist students through the process of becoming a more proficient writer than when they entered my classroom.

## **Reading Process**

Reading is a process, not just the finished product. Writing is a process that is complex. It requires many basic skills that build to work together in written language. There is a great deal of items to connect when composing a written piece of work. "Writing does indeed require a juggling and coordination of many skills at the same time. The more automatic each subskill is, the easier it will be for the students to incorporate it with other subskills" (Richard, 2002, p. 1). I have found many different ways to think about the writing process. My favorite one is P-O-W-E-R. The acronym stands for:

P – Plan the paper

O - Organize the ideas and elaborations

W - Write the draft

E – Edit the draft, look for errors

R – Revise the paper and enhance (Richards, 2002)

I believe that the most important step is planning and organizing the ideas. Research states, "Preplanning is perhaps the most important activity within the writing task. For some students it is the most difficult, especially if they experience any sort of learning differences" (Richards, 2002, p. 2). During this stage, the students can organize their ideas using graphic organizers and many various methods (Richards, 2002). The preplanning stage allows the students to visually see what their ideas look like (Richards, 2002). Each of these steps in the writing process are important. If a student skips a step the writing will be much more complicated and confusing.

I have noticed a reoccurring theme, throughout my research, that the most important part of the writing program is to practice writing as much as possible. Research states that students need to be writing everyday no matter what grade or academic level. It is important that this writing is meaningful but it does not have to be extensive or ready

to turn in for a grade (Wood & Shea-Bischoff (1997). Wood & Shea-Bischoff (1997) stated:

The only way students will improve their writing is to practice writing as much as possible. Many of these efforts need not be graded in the formal sense or edited to perfection. They are just that practice writing sessions, and they can be integrated in all areas of curriculum. (p. 50).

I need to give my students opportunities to write every day.

### **Reluctant Writers**

The following idea from my research struck me like a brick in the face. Reluctant writers fall across all academic levels. Many if not all teachers deal with the frustration of reluctant writers on a daily basis. As I was researching characteristics of reluctant writers there is not one definite answer as to why a student is reluctant to write. There are many varied reasons including, but not limited to: processing issues, lacking basic knowledge of writing, no interest in the topic, lack of motivation, find no meaning in writing, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and many more. The question remains what strategies and activities will help with these issues in my classroom?

From the research that I did concerning this subject the main reason that a student could be considered a reluctant writer is when they consider writing to be meaningless. The student does not consider writing as having a connection to their everyday life. The high school students I work with really believe that they no longer will use writing skills once out of high school. They feel it is irrelevant and meaningless. Regina Ritter (1999) states:

When writing is not meaningful, it is difficult to pull together the variety of skills needed to develop enthusiasm about writing. Students learn to write by writing, which then gives them the confidence to continue to write and continue to develop their skills

using a variety of modalities that can help create enthusiasm for writing and help students view writing as a more meaningful activity (P. 2).

When students lack confidence in their writing skills that do not want to write. Reluctant writers may lack confidence in their ability to write. Helping a student build his or her confidence in writing will be different for every student. One article on reluctant writers said, “The key element to getting kids to write is confidence. Boosting their confidence in any way that you can will inspire students to do more for you” (Cabral, 2014, p. 3). It is important to build students’ confidence in their writing ability on a daily basis.

The last two characteristics of reluctant writers that I am going to share with you are that they lack basic knowledge of writing and have a fear of making mistakes in their writing. Some fears of writing go very deep and will affect developing skills. One of the articles I read stated, “The fear of making mistakes and/or lack of confidence may prevent students from developing the skills needed for written language” (Pierce, 1997, p. 19). Teachers should work on basic skills, if necessary, to help develop the automatic use of basic skills. Richards (1999) stated:

When students are frustrated with individual components related to the task of writing and/or when they struggle to get started or to keep track of their thoughts, the writing process is not fun, and their lack of enthusiasm becomes evident. Writing remains at the level of drudgery no matter how exciting the topic and students may feel threatened by the process of writing (P. 3).

As a teacher, I want to reduce my high school special education students’ fear, frustrations, struggles and feeling of threat as they write.

### **Product of Strategies/Activities**

When I finished my research on the characteristics of reluctant writers, I started the search for strategies/activities I can implement in my classroom to help reluctant writers.

The first article I found was from “Classroom Notes Plus” Quarterly from *National Council of Teachers of English*. This article called “Reading Smooths the Way to Writing” really spoke to me because much of my formal writing lessons/assignments occur connected with a novel or short story we are reading. This article states, “If character development and a storyline are already established even reluctant writers usually have little difficulty picking up the story and continuing.” (Greci, 2005, p. 5). This article has four strategies that were fantastic. I cannot wait to use them. The first strategy discussed in the article is called Following Up a Suspenseful Moment. In this strategy the teacher picks a suspenseful moment in the novel or short story. After picking the suspenseful moment the teacher would then have the students take the author’s role and continue the story. The required amount of writing varies according to the student’s level of academic functioning, anywhere from a few sentences to a page. Another strategy in this article is called Resolving an Ambiguous Ending. In this strategy students write an ending that is clearer than the one already written. This strategy would be difficult for my students because their inferencing skills are weak. They would have trouble recognizing that an ending is not the best version. Dialogue Writing is another strategy I am interested in. During this strategy the student will write a dialogue that would occur between two characters in the story. The teacher should pick a suspenseful spot in the novel or short story to have the students write the dialogue. The last strategy that interest me from this article is to Write as the Main Character. During this strategy the students will assume the main character’s role and write what they would do in the situation (Greci, 2005). For all four of these strategies it is important to model the activity for the students. I am excited to use these four strategies in my classroom.

Next, I found an article called “Four Great Strategies to Inspire Reluctant Writers” on [www.writeawaywithme.com](http://www.writeawaywithme.com). This article starts by discussing mind mapping. When I discussed the writing process I mentioned the importance of the process of preplanning

before starting to write. The idea of mind mapping and using graphic organizers to think through their writing is a strategy mentioned in many articles concerning helping reluctant writers to engage in writing. It gives students a chance to experiment with ideas and outcomes before starting the actual writing task. Mind mapping can lead to the next strategy that the article mentions, which is storyboarding. Storyboarding helps students see how a story they are preplanning would look. This is a great tool to help the writing process because students can visualize and structure their writing before starting the task. I have only explained two of the four strategies from this article. The other two are just versions of the same. I have never used either strategy, but I plan to soon.

Next, I came upon an article from International Society of Technology in Education (ISTE) called “5 Strategies for Inspiring Reluctant Writers.” I saw ideas in this article that would work very well in my classroom. The article stresses letting students write about topics that interest them and they pick the topic. I have noticed in my class that this can make things more difficult because they have trouble coming up with topics that interest them. It is easier just to assign a topic or a writing prompt to the class. However, the article makes me think about letting them choose more often. When a student is able to make the decisions in their writing they take more ownership and will be more engaged in their writing. (Richard, 1999)

The article is also the first one that I found that dealt with digital methods of writing. It stated using blogs could help students come up with ideas for writing by using quotes and pictures that they found on the blog. When students share reactions to something on the blog it can grow into a topic for a longer writing assignment. The article discussed using digital tools such as word processing as a helpful tool to reluctant writers. Using digital tools, such as word processing, is a strategy that I may incorporate more to move away from pencil and paper. The idea of sitting down and putting pencil to paper can be demanding for some students. Students using a digital format allows for ease of

the writing process. It allows the student to type and edit as necessary. They can move items around and add to their piece (Letter, n.d). Another strategy that helps reach reluctant writers is to publish and share the student's work often. The article talks about how sharing and publishing the student's work gives them a feeling of accomplishment. The feedback is a good motivator for the student to keep writing (Letter, n.d).

As I was researching the strategies that would help reluctant writers write more I came upon an article from [www.broward.k12.fl.us](http://www.broward.k12.fl.us) called "Strategies for Reluctant Writers". Just like the article that discussed mind mapping this article stresses the preplanning of writing. Using graphic organizers would allow the students a chance to think their writing through before beginning to put it on the paper. Cronenberg, (n.d.) states:

A graphic organizer provides a user-friendly format to assist the writer in guiding and organizing his/her thinking, enabling the writer to translate those thoughts into an organized written format. Graphic organizers visually represent the thinking needed to compose a written task, as well as to organize and remember information. (P. 1)

The next site I used to do my research on strategies for use with reluctant writers was the *National Council of Teachers of English*. One article is called "ERIC/RCS Report: Help for Reluctant Writers". This article discussed both structured writing through the Free Write strategy and unstructured writing through the Journal Writing strategy. The structured writing called Free Write is when a teacher gives a writing prompt to the student and they write on it. The key will be picking a topic that has enough interest that they will distract the student and they can have a good writing experience. The other strategy was the unstructured writing of journal writing. In journal writing the student can write on anything they want when assigned to write. Benefits of journal writing include "personal growth, reduce writing apprehension, strengthen prewriting in students'

composing processes, and enhance the development of writing abilities” (Auten, 1983, p. 923).

The next article that I found was from the *Association for Middle Level Education* (AMLE) called “Helping Struggling Writers Write”. This strategy is using wordless picture books as a stimulus for writing. After the students have been exposed to wordless picture books and the process explained the students are then asked to write a line for each page. After completing each page, the student will have a story that they wrote. I love this idea and cannot wait to get ahold of some of these wordless picture books for my classroom.

As I continued to search for strategies to reach reluctant writers it became evident that using Writer’s Workshop is a method that many schools use to improve writing. Writer’s Workshop was discussed on the class discussion board. Writer’s Workshop came up in a number of articles including “Motivating Reluctant Writers” and a book titled Classrooms That Work. Writer’s Workshop is a “step by step approach that helps students to develop an understanding of their writing” (Pierce, 1997, p. 21). This workshop approach is a wonderful opportunity to present individualized instruction as the whole class is actively writing. This strategy/activity begins with the teacher presenting a small mini-lesson on a subskill of writing. After the mini- lesson there is a sustained length of time for active writing. The workshop method promotes independence as a writer. During the time scheduled for active writing the following takes place: preplanning and brainstorming about the topic/idea the student wants to write on, write on the topic that interest them while the teacher circulates to assist as needed and hold writing conferences with individual students, edit the writing, and share their writing with other students and teacher. Every mention of Writer’s Workshop in my reading stressed the time period of sharing their work with others. The emphasis in a Writers’ Workshop is to get the student’s writing, not pinpointing mistakes of spelling, punctuation, etc..... All



those corrections take place during the editing phase. I believe there would be some uses for this in my classroom with adaptations that would include breaking the time into smaller pieces. The forty-five-minute time frame a few times a week will not work within my English class. I would like to find a way to implement some of the Writer's Workshop method in my class.

During my research I found an unbelievable amount of strategies and activities that would help reluctant writers want to write. It is important to realize that these strategies are used as a process to help a reluctant writer to become a more proficient writer. No one strategy or activity is the magic answer but using many various strategies and activities as a way to get the student to "buy" into the importance of being able to write. The key to teaching writing is to get them to "buy" into it. The more they write the more interested they will become in the concept.

As I conclude this paper I feel that this has been a very productive research experience. I have looked through many strategies in the last few weeks. As a matter of fact, I just barely scratched the surface with the thirteen strategies I explored with you in this paper. There are numerous strategies and activities to teach students to enjoy writing. The time I spent doing this research has been very beneficial to me as I strive to become a better writing teacher. I now have in my tool belt thirteen new strategies to use with my special education students to help them in writing, both for personal writing and school writing. I am excited about getting into my classes and putting some new strategies in place to be able to reach more students with the enjoyment of writing both in personal writing and school writing.

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National Writing Project

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iSearch Paper

### Mentor Texts

Each year, I struggle to find a way to teach grammar to my high school seniors. I *assume* that the middle school English teachers have covered the information, and I *know* that the other high school English teacher has reviewed the information. But for some reason, my seniors do not demonstrate the expected level of grammar skill and their papers are plagued with errors. In my senior classes, I hope to improve student writing, focusing on style more than foundational structure. However, this is difficult to do when some of my students struggle to compose complete thoughts.

When beginning the iSearch assignment, I thought that my focus would be on grammar. My question became “How can I efficiently teach grammar at the senior level?” Because my students are soon to graduate, I have little time to prepare them for college and career writing. I acknowledge the necessity of creating authentic writing assignments that can transition my students to writing outside of the classroom. So instead of focusing on grammar, I shifted my focus to teaching my students to write well. My revised research question became “How can I teach my students to write well in the real world?” The answer that I discovered is modeling and mentor texts.

For the purpose of organization, this iSearch paper will appear similar to an annotated bibliography. When reflecting on my style of learning, I found that organizing my ideas by source would be most helpful in the future. The order in which the sources are listed in this paper is simply chronological and does not denote importance to my research. Texts that I found to be unimportant or irrelevant were excluded from this paper.

## Part One: Source Analysis

Gallagher, Kelly. *Write Like This: Teaching real-world writing through modeling and mentor texts*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2011. Print.

Gallagher's text offers a foundational purpose for the use of mentor texts. He writes, "When students see *why* writing is important in a post-high school world, they are more likely to give writing the time and attention it deserves" (8). This point stands out to me because I often struggle to motivate my students to want to write, not to mention write well. According to Gallagher, students will be more likely to engage in their writing assignments when they view them as authentic. A key piece to authentic writing is authentic modeling. Gallagher explains that authentic modeling comes through two avenues: the teacher and the real-world. The first step is teacher-driven; teachers should show students what writing looks like. Again from Gallagher, "the teacher should model by writing—and think out loud while writing—in front of the class" (15). Students need to see *and* hear the teacher's thought process, including times that writing is difficult or time-consuming. In addition to teacher modeling, texts found in the real world need to be made available to the students. Gallagher points out that it is important that students be able to do more than understand what a text says. Instead, he argues that he wants "them to begin to recognize *how* the text is constructed" (20). This is the same goal as my demo in class. For me, the goal is for students to be able to add to their writer's toolbox ideas and techniques to improve their individual styles. The bulk of Gallagher's book provides multiple examples of authentic writing assignments with mentor texts for a variety of purposes (i.e Evaluate and Judge, Inquire and Explore, Analyze and Interpret, etc.) (see fig. 1). The text clearly shows that students should engage in multiple types of writing, perhaps none of which will be the traditional five-paragraph essay. As Gallagher says, "... in the real world, there is not such thing as a five-paragraph essay" (230). This is going to be both wonderful and difficult for me to accept. On one hand, removing focus from the five-paragraph essay will free me to select more engaging writing assignments. On the other hand,

stepping away from the five-paragraph essay is like removing a limb; it has always been a part of me and life without it just won't be the same. In the end, however, I know that more authentic assignments will be beneficial to my students and their success after high school.

Figure 1

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**Appendix 1: Real-World Writing Purposes**

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Express and Reflect	The writer . . . . . . expresses or reflects on his or her own life and experiences. . . . often looks backward in order to look forward.
Inform and Explain	The writer . . . . . . states a main point and purpose. . . . tries to present the information in a surprising way.
Evaluate and Judge	The writer . . . . . . focuses on the worth of person, object, idea, or other phenomenon. . . . usually specifies the criteria to the object being seen as "good" or "bad."
Inquire and Explore	The writer . . . . . . wrestles with a question or problem. . . . hooks with the problem and lets the reader watch them wrestle with it.
Analyze and Interpret	The writer . . . . . . seeks to analyze and interpret phenomena that are difficult to understand or explain.
Take a Stand/ Propose a Solution	The writer . . . . . . seeks to persuade audiences to accept a particular position on a controversial issue. . . . describes the problem, proposes a solution, and provides justification.

*Adapted from Bean, Chappell, and Gillam (2003).*

*Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling and Mentor Texts by Kelly Gallagher. Copyright © 2011. Stenhouse Publishers.*

method of revision. This  
replace, Add, Delete, and  
ers to mark their changes.

Overall, Gallagher's text proved to be highly valuable on the topic of mentor texts. The lessons included in chapters two through seven will be highly useful in the high school classroom.

Figure 2



Figure 8.3  
RADaR: The Four Steps of Revision

But it could be a lot better.” The good news, I tell them, is that unlike the remodeling of a house, the remodeling of an essay does not require nineteen steps (or lots of money). In contrast, remodeling an essay only requires four steps. To teach my young writers how to take lousy essays and make them better, I show them the four steps of revision that writers do when they run their papers under the “RADaR” (see Figure 8.3).

Taken from *Writing Coach*, a Prentice Hall writing program I cowrote with Jeff Anderson (2012), RADaR is an acronym for the four revision steps: replacing, adding, deleting, and reordering. To help my students understand these four areas of revision, I share with them the chart in Figure 8.4.

R	A	D and	R
Replace . . .	Add . . .	Delete . . .	Reorder . . .
. . . words that are not specific.	. . . new information.	. . . unrelated ideas.	. . . to make better sense or to flow better.
. . . words that are overused.	. . . descriptive adjectives and adverbs.	. . . sentences that sound good but create unity problems.	. . . so details support main ideas.
. . . sentences that are unclear.	. . . rhetorical or literary devices.	. . . unwanted repetition.	. . . to avoid “bed-to-bed” writing.
		. . . unnecessary details.	

Figure 8.4 The Revision Steps of RADaR

For each of the areas of RADaR, I share examples with my students:

#### Replace

*Before:*

As I ran to the finish line, my heart was beating.

*After:*

As I sprinted to the tape, my heart was pounding in my chest.

#### Add

*Before:*

Shadows made the night seem scary.

*After:*

Ominous shadows made the dark night seem even more frightening.

Applebee, Arthur N., and Judith A. Langer. *Writing Instruction That Works*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2013. Print.

The first chapter of Applebee and Langer's text discusses research findings for the past 25(ish) years of writing instruction in schools. They look not only at what teachers are doing in their classrooms, but also at what has been proven effective. Chapter three specifically addresses writing in the ELA classroom and is the focus of my research. One idea that stands out to me is the shifting role of teachers. The authors suggest that "rather than being primarily the assigner and assessor of writing as in so-called traditional or product-focused writing instruction..., the teacher essentially is responsible for leading students' inquiry into writing practices and processes" (30). This idea plays directly into my demo presented in class. The "Ten Best Sentences" lesson is only a small part of a larger lesson that encourages my students to find their own mentor texts and identify their own goals for writing. This text also presented the idea of "anchor papers" (35). Although the name is new to me, the idea is not. "Anchor papers," as explained in the text, are sample student responses from previous years. These papers, though not written by the teacher or professionals, can serve as mentor texts for students. The benefit of using previous student work is that current students can point out both the positive and negative qualities. One of the revision strategies included in this text is from the classroom of Ms. Greene at Amadon High School. She has her students use post-it notes to ask questions during the editing process. Most important in this process is that the students avoid correcting grammar. Instead she "calls her students' attention away from merely correcting surface errors, and focuses them instead on asking the writer authentic questions about content and clarity" (38). This is a key feature that I need to remember. Grammar is not the only important aspect of composition. Grammar is important, but clear *communication*, not good grammar, is the end goal. All of the examples in this book are from real teachers; they are authentic and ready for imitation.

Daniels, Harvey, and Nancy Steinke. *Texts and Lessons for Teaching Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2013. Print.

Although I have no “research” to present from this book, it did prove to be a valuable resource for lesson ideas that include mentor texts. I’m often looking for supplemental texts to go with longer novels or units, and this text provided me with many ideas. One idea, though not directly about composing strong sentences, is that teachers should model reading as well as writing. My previous resources have focused on writing (which, after all, is my topic), but this text made me think about the ability of my students to *hear* strong writing. I encourage my students to read their work aloud because it is often the only way to hear a mistake. However, what should I do if I have a struggling reader who cannot see or hear the strength of mentor texts? I see two possible solutions to this problem: 1) read the mentor texts aloud to the students (or provide some other audio version) or 2) allow my struggling students more time to work with the mentor text. When reflecting on my in-class demo, perhaps it would have been beneficial to some of the students for me read the 11 mentor sentences aloud. Some students stated that the longer, more complex sentences were difficult to understand. Had I read them aloud, the students might have been able to *hear* the style and technique even if they could not *see* it. This also reminds me that a “text” does not always have to be a written work, but can be any genre of work that provides an avenue for communication.

Owles, Carol, and Donna Herman. "Terrific Teaching Tips: Using Mentor Texts to Develop Our Readers and Writers." *Illinois Reading Council Journal* 42.4 (2014): 51-58. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 1 July 2016.

This was a short article that provided some quick tips for using mentor texts at various grade levels. The authors start by emphasizing the connection between reading and writing as the basis for mentor texts. Owles and Herman write, “Who better to teach our students about particular qualities of good writing than the beloved authors we (teachers) and they (our students) read and admire?!” (51). The authors also express that in order to find success with mentor texts, a



“classroom culture of reading aloud” (51) is necessary. Additionally, classrooms should be equipped with libraries that provide relevant and appealing mentor texts appropriate for the grade level. Quoting Fletcher and Portalipi, the authors say that “the writing you get out of your students can only be as good as the classroom literature that surrounds and sustains it” (52). Looking at my classroom, this may be a challenge due to budget restraints. However, in the current culture of technology and digital writing, I should be able to direct my students to well-written, online texts. Another important factor that was made clear in this article is that students need time to read the mentor texts. This seems like an obvious idea, but when I think about my classroom, it is clear that I do not provide enough time for my students to engage in mentor texts. Another concern of mine, which was addressed during my demo, is the fear that imitation will lead to plagiarism. This article helps soften that fear by reminding me that learning is a gradual process. Students may begin by emulating a specific text but will eventually gain a general skill. The article also suggest that teachers provide students with hard copies of mentor texts so that they may annotate directly on the text. Additionally, the authors recommend keeping mentor texts in a portfolio so that students can access them as resources later. Perhaps the most striking idea presented in this text is that by using mentor texts, students will gain confidence as writers. I had not directly considered this as a benefit, but I fully recognize the potential reward that it will provide my students.

Gallagher, Kelly. "Making the Most of Mentor Texts." *Educational Leadership* 71.7 (2014): 28-33. *ERIC*. Web. 1 July 2016.

This is the second text by Kelly Gallagher that I have used during this research, and it is just as helpful as the first. More succinct and limited in scope, this article provides a three-step approach to using mentor texts. Gallagher emphasizes that “effective modeling entails much more than handing students a mentor text and asking them to imitate it” (29). Instead, he suggests that students must first engage with the text and discern what to imitate. Echoing the ideas in *Write Like This*, Gallagher says that it is important that a student recognize how a text is written. The second

key feature in using mentor texts is that students continue engaging with the text during their drafting phase. Students should be encouraged to frequently return to the mentor text as they are crafting original work. The final step is to look at anchor papers. By allowing students time to look at and analyze examples of good and bad writing, they may be inspired to make changes in their own writing.

Gainer, Jesse. "21st-Century Mentor Texts: Developing Critical Literacies in the Information Age." *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 57.1 (2013): 16-19. *ERIC*. Web. 1 July 2016.

This article took a vastly different approach to the use of mentor texts (as compared to previous sources). Instead of using mentor texts as structural guides for student writing, Gainer suggests that teachers use mentor texts to prepare students for a world of digital writing and media. He writes, "When educators help students see themselves as writers, they begin to read like writers and to write under the influence of reading" (17). This is true, he continues, for digital literacy as well. Students need to understand and become proficient consumers of new avenues of information because it is likely that they will be contributing to this field as writers.

Sanders, Jennifer, and Jennifer Moudy. "Literature Apprentices: Understanding Nonfiction Text Structures with Mentor Texts." *Journal Of Children's Literature* 34.2 (2008): 31-42. *OmniFile Full Text Select (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 1 July 2016.

The first idea presented in this article is one that has plagued me since I began my teaching career: "...many teachers lack knowledge of instructional strategies for helping students comprehend nonfiction and are unsure of how to move students beyond the five-paragraph essay or formulaic writing to produce their own creative, original nonfiction" (31). This article indicates (not surprisingly) that "the process of apprenticing preservice teachers to nonfiction literature and writing" is a possible solution. In my mind, the Writing Project is an excellent example of this type

of writing apprenticeship. I am thankful for the National Writing Project and the EIU Summer Institute because both have helped me feel more confident in the area of writing instruction. However, I feel that a large gap still exists between what I am currently accomplishing in my classroom and what I wish to accomplish. As stated before, I am hopeful that mentor texts will serve as an effective method of teaching students to write well. Other than echoing my fears, this article also discusses the idea of “creative nonfiction” as “informational writing that has voice and style and intentionally and skillfully employs a variety of writing techniques to engage the reader, keep the reader’s attention, and convey the intended message” (31). It is clear to me that nonfiction writing is also creative writing, but my students seem to struggle with the concept. When they hear “creative writing,” they immediately jump to poetry or first-person narration. Through the use of mentor texts, I hope to show my students the creativity that goes into all types of writing. The article repeats many of the ideas stated in previous sources, including the need for students to read and reread mentor texts while creating original work. It also touches on the importance of providing high-quality literature and time for students to read. Although I did not read any book by Lucy Calkins, she was referenced in this and other resources, specifically, her use of the phrase “touchstone texts” for mentor texts. I believe that as I continue my research on this topic, reading works by Calkins will be highly beneficial.

## **Part Two: Results and Reflection**

Following my time spent researching mentor texts, I am even more convinced of their place in the classroom. Perhaps the greatest discovery for me, however, is the bigger picture. Writing cannot exist in the bubble of an English classroom; it is an essential part of the world. Students need to be prepared for real-world reading and writing, but must also possess the confidence to engage those texts. Looking forward to the fall semester, I plan to create new lessons that include authentic texts that are paired with authentic writing experiences. I am not 100% sure what this will look like, but I am excited about the possibilities. In any case, I must be sure to include the

following aspects in my use of mentor texts: high-quality, grade-appropriate, multi-genre literature and time for students to engage (and reengage) with the literature. Beyond that, I more fully understand my responsibilities as the teacher. Like the mentor texts, I can serve as a model to my students; I must model reading and writing, but also thinking. Although my focus has shifted since the beginning of this search, I know that it has been for the better. Focusing on grammar within the context of grammar is simply not an effective method for improving the writing of my students. Not only is it not effective, it is not relevant to the ever-changing world. At the completion of this project, I fully believe that the use of mentor texts will enhance my teaching and my students' understanding.

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# Mini-Lesson Toolbox for the High School Classroom

## Eastern Illinois Writing Project

### Summer Institute 2016

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##### Introduction

Over the past couple of years I have encountered students who struggle with basic writing tasks. I found myself having the same conversations over and over with individual students addressing capitalization, commas, sentence structure, the list could go on. In order to more efficiently provide instruction for my diverse group of learners, I would like to create a toolbox of ready to go mini lessons that enhance my writing instruction and curriculum.

Although we are taught in teacher preparation programs that small group instruction is beneficial for students, it is easier said than done. Author Deborah Dean says in *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools*, “Teaching adolescents strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions has shown a dramatic effect on the quality of students’ writing.” (15) It is important to teach students of any age about specific strategies which in turn would make them better writers. In high school it is important to remember that there will be students who need a refresher on skills taught in lower grades. These mini lessons over writing strategies will enable frequent personalized instruction in my high school English classroom.

##### Research

###### Source #1

Using the search terms “ high school writing mini lessons” I found a website entitled, "Ms. McClure's Class". This is a classroom website used to store previously created mini lessons. After reading the descriptions and class information I may have found a source of samples to springboard my own "toolbox" She uses them with sixth grade students, but after looking at individual lessons they would be easily redesigned to be more academically appropriate for my students. The website is designed as an online portfolio with hyperlinks to the numerous mini lessons she uses in her classroom.

An example would be a lesson on writing numbers (McClure). This is something that not all students would necessarily need to sit down and relearn. However, I can see the students in my head that I had this conversation with. This lesson is something that may take 5 minutes to discuss, the student could make use of the new information to revise their current writing assignment. This is one type of mini lesson that I would like to use during the upcoming school year.

### **Source #2**

Scott Peha created a PDF entitled *Welcome to Writer's Workshop* this is a very detailed how-to guide on implementing the full workshop model in your classroom. This source speaks to the fact that students get more out of this type of instruction, it provides authentic writing experiences, saves time grading, and allows for one on one conferencing. Although this source did not give me any information to put into practice it did, however, reassure me that this a useful and efficient way to model a classroom.

### **Source #3**

In the book *Writing Instruction That Works* Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer discuss the best practices of writing in middle and high school classrooms. The book did not have a lot of information about mini lessons. Unfortunately it focused on more "big picture" instruction, so it does not really help me. I did find one section that I can modify to work for my "toolbox of mini lessons." There was a section about revision which is something that may need to be reviewed with small groups. I found a great checklist that would provide a step by step guide for students to use before they turn their writing in for assessment (45).

The idea of including revision checklists with each writing assessment is something simple and practical that could be implemented immediately in a classroom. So many times teachers who teach the same class each year can sometimes forget the students are taking the class for the first time. To make it even more meaningful it would be nice to use these in each of the four levels of English to create consistency.

### **Source #4**

In the book *Writer's Workshop for the Common Core* by Warren Combs provides a step by step guide to running the writing workshop model in your classroom. It is a very practical book that could easily help a teacher go 100% with this model. The portions that I took the most from were chapters 8-13. These chapters were broken down into skill based "lessons" to help students better their writing.

One example is ch. 10, "Fine Tune Leads and Closes with Me" after reading it gave instructional scripts and models to use with a group (93). The criticism I have for this book is that it is geared for middle grades, the items I was interested

in could be modified to work with secondary students. Overall, this book will provide me a few mini lessons to use in the future.

#### **Source #5**

I found Mrs. Gerstmann's English Class website, this site was created by a high school teacher who seems to teach the same grade level as I do. After looking through her resources, some of the lessons were credited Mrs. McClure's website that I found early on in the research process. Some of the stand out lessons include comma usage, capitalization, writing numbers, and subject verb agreement. She actually has many resources that I will use for more than just my research of mini lessons.

#### **Source #6**

I also found a website created by professor Tracy W. Smith at Appalachian State University. She teaches “Language Arts in Middle Grades” as a part of the course the students created mini-lessons These [mini- lessons](#) were created by pre-service teachers. These mini lessons seem to be longer in length and better for whole group instruction. I will keep this site for future reference but it was not helpful in my creation of a writing tool box of mini lessons.

#### **Source #7**

ReadWriteThink has been a go to place for lesson plans and ideas to incorporate into my classroom. When I searched mini-lessons there are an abundance of lessons written by leaders in the field that would make a great addition to my toolbox. An example I found, “And I Quote: A Punctuation Proofreading Mini lesson.” This lesson although scheduled for approximately 50 minutes, could be cut down to short 10 minute increments based off of the needs of students. This site has supplemental material and handouts to use with students. I am sure this site will have even more information as I continue to browse my search results.

### **Findings**

Through my research I have found in terms of writing instruction most believe that small group instruction is best for students. Although specifically thinking about high school there is not much in the area of small group instruction. On my quest looking for mini- lessons to use as personalized instruction, I found that most of these were geared towards middle grades. Even though these are below my target grades, most were easily modified to fit my criteria.

I have found that although we value small group instruction and direct instruction of mini-lessons there are not very many practical resources at the high school level. I have found enough resources and with some modifications and personalization I will be able to use them in my classroom.

### **Conclusion**



Throughout my research process I have had the chance to discover and create mini lessons to be used in my high school English classroom. It was my intention to create such a toolbox to alleviate last minute planning during the school year. I also could envision this becoming part of a self- paced curriculum that students could access on their own. There were challenges when researching strategies for the high school classroom mostly because the research is geared towards elementary and middle grades. But after all is said and done I have created something that will be valuable in my teaching practice.

My end product is a toolbox ( google doc) containing mini lessons to be used during the school year as an instructional tool. This toolbox contains adaptations of mini-lessons found through my research. This toolbox will also be shared with my department colleagues in an attempt to create a consistent curriculum.

Here is a link to my ["toolbox"](#). This is an ongoing project, I will continue to update this toolbox as I go.

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## Mini-Lesson Toolbox for the High School Classroom

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## Introduction

It is important to teach students of any age about specific strategies which in turn would make them better writers. In high school it is important to remember that there will be students who need a refresher on skills taught in lower grades. These mini lessons over writing strategies will enable frequent personalized instruction in my high school English classroom.

## Me or I?

You already know that a noun is a word that names a person, place, thing, or idea. A *pronoun* is a word that takes the place of a noun; so instead of saying Ms. McClure all the time, I can say *I* or *me*. When I address *the class*, I can say *you*; when you talk about *the class*, you can say *we* or *us*. The *case* of a pronoun tells how it relates to other words in the sentences. there are two kinds, or cases, of pronouns: nominative-case and objective-case.

- *Nominative-case* pronouns are used as *actors actors*, as *subjects of sentences*: *I, he, she, we, they, you, and it*. They usually come at the beginning of a sentence.
- *Objective-case* pronouns *receive the action*: *me, him, her, us, them, you, and it*. They usually come at the middle or end of a sentence.
- Errors in pronoun case usually occur when the subject or object is compound (more than one person) and a writer confuses the nominative (actor) and objective (recipient of the action) cases.

*Examples:*

- Kyle and me love M&M's (wrong).
- Kyle and I love M&M's (correct).
- Rachael gave M&M's to Kyle and I (wrong).
- Rachael gave M&M's to Kyle and me (correct).

To test for the correct case of a pronoun when there's a compound construction, e.g., (*name*) *and I/me*, drop the (*name*) *and* part, then ask yourself, is it *I* or *me*? In other words, test the pronoun by itself with the verb.

*Examples to try:*

- [*Kyle and*] \_\_\_\_\_ love M&M's. (*I or me?*)
- Rachael gave M&M's to [*Kyle and*] \_\_\_\_\_. (*I or me?*)

**Pronoun Case Review** Directions: Write the correct pronoun on the line, using the referent(s) in brackets at the end of each sentence.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ collect stamps. (Jack and Jill)
2. My grandma and \_\_\_\_\_ watch "Wheel of Fortune." (myself)
3. \_\_\_\_\_ girls are going to wreck the boys. (we or us)
4. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ have pet weasels. (Tyler and myself)

5. Do you and \_\_\_\_\_ like Slurpees®? (Molly)
6. Why are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ eating David's lunch? (Nick and Marcia)
7. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are having a big basketball rivalry. (Us and them or We and they?)
8. The Godivas belong to Nola and \_\_\_\_\_ (myself); Toby and \_\_\_\_\_ get the Tootsie Rolls. (Anne)
9. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ love opera. (Peter and Nora)
10. The award for rowdiest student was split between \_\_\_\_\_ and Jordan. (Joshua)

**credit:** [http://msmclure.com/?page\\_id=6519](http://msmclure.com/?page_id=6519)

## Writing Numbers

There are times when it's legal to write numerals as numerals, but there are other times when numbers must be written as words. Most sixth graders tend to use numerals all of the time, without being aware that often that is not acceptable. The **general rule** is to ***spell out numerals of one or two words***: three, seventeen, thirty-seven, five hundred, fifty-five hundred, three million, nine-tenths.

EXCEPT: Use numerals to express: decimals (1.008 ), money (\$251.83 ), percents (120%), time (12:15 ), telephone numbers (555-1212), dates (April 6, 2011), book chapters (chapter 11), book pages (page 192 ), addresses (2856 Adobe Rd.), ZIP codes (94954 ), route numbers (Route 66), and big numbers (8.5 billion).

NOTE: A sentence can't ever begin with a numeral. Either spell out the numeral, or recast the sentence.

- WRONG: 1968 was a momentous year in U.S. history.
- CORRECT: Nineteen-sixty-eight was a momentous year in U.S. history.
- BETTER: The year 1968 marked a momentous time in U.S. history.

**Credit:**

[http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/webpages/jgerstmann/writing\\_and\\_grammar.cfm?subpage=875137](http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/webpages/jgerstmann/writing_and_grammar.cfm?subpage=875137)

## Punctuation Information

The intricacies of punctuation could form a year of in-depth study, but these sixth grade punctuation lessons are designed to clear up confusion and to strengthen writing. We won't be covering old ground that should already be mastered (e.g., periods at the ends of sentences, question marks after questions, capitalizing at sentence beginnings, ellipses to show omissions and pauses), but rather, we will do a series of sixth grade punctuation greatest hits. These lessons will address confusions about periods, frequent occasions for omitted commas, reasons to use a semicolon, functions of a colon, differences between a dash and a hyphen, the fine points of using apostrophes on various kinds of possessive nouns, and why and how to avoid parenthesis in nontechnical prose.

### Period Confusions

1. A regular, declarative sentence that ends with an abbreviation takes one period at the end.
2. **EXAMPLE:**
  - I love the novels of Christopher Paul Curtis.
  - I awoke from my nap at 11:30 p.m.
3. *But* a question or exclamation mark at the end *keeps* the abbreviation's period.
4. **EXAMPLE:**
  - You woke up at 11:30 p.m.?
5. A period *always* comes *before* the closing quotation mark, whether it's part of the quote or not.
6. **EXAMPLE:**
  - I like Billy Collins' idea of "the companionship of a poem."
7. *But* a question mark, an exclamation point, a colon, or a semicolon comes *after* the closing quotation mark, unless it's part of the quote.
8. **EXAMPLE:**
  - Do you believe in "the companionship of a poem"?
  - Have you heard the song "Do You Believe in Magic?"
  - She said, "Give it to me"; I pretended I didn't hear her.
  - "To be or not to be": now, there's a cliché.
9. When a group of words within a sentence is enclosed in parentheses, the period at the end belongs *outside* the closing parenthesis.
10. **EXAMPLE:**
  - Kay Ryan should win the Nobel Prize for literature (in her opinion).
11. *But* if a whole sentence is enclosed in parentheses, the period at the end belongs *inside* the closing parenthesis.
12. **EXAMPLE:**

- My students adore Kay Ryan. (I wish one of them would be more open-minded about Seamus Heaney).

## Most Common Comma Omissions

1. Between two sentences joined by a conjunction (e.g., and, but, or, so), you need a comma before the conjunction.
2. **EXAMPLE:**
  - The road was snowy, but we let our daughter drive anyway.
  - Riley threw the ball endlessly, and Killian caught it every time.
3. **BUT:**
  - Kate has strep throat and can't perform in the sixth grade musical.
  - (Note: the words that follow the and aren't a sentence. They can't stand alone and make sense, so there's no comma.)
4. After a phrase or clause that starts a sentence, you need a comma.
5. **EXAMPLE:**
  - By the time I got to it, the ice cream cake had been devoured.
  - When everyone was finally ready, we piled into my brother's minivan.
  - While I showered, Bob made breakfast.
6. In a series of three or more elements/items with one conjunction at the end, you need a comma before the conjunction.
7. **EXAMPLE:**
  - By the time I got to it, the ice cream cake had been devoured.
  - When everyone was finally ready, we piled into my brother's minivan.
  - While I showered, Bob made breakfast.
8. You need a comma after a *vocative*: a name spoken in direct address.
9. **EXAMPLE:**
  - Mom, have you seen my homework folder?
  - Okay, Mario, let's go.
  - If I were you, Trina, I'd read this series by Lois Lowry.
10. You need a comma after an interjection or weak exclamation.
11. **EXAMPLE:**
  - Hey, Mom, what's up?
  - Sure, I'll go along.
  - Okay, I'll take two.
  - Yes, I'm talking to you.
  - Well, what did he say?
  - Wow, that was close.
  - Hi, Mr. Williamson.

## Reasons for a Semicolon

A semicolon is one of the least used but most useful punctuation marks. It shows a close relationship between two statements or sentences. Often, when writers commit a comma

splice, it's because they've recognized that the spliced sentences go together meaning-wise, but they don't know the mark that will make the connection grammatically legal. The semicolon fills the bill. It's stronger than a comma but not as final as a period.

### Use a semicolon

1. To join two or more sentences that aren't connected by a conjunction (e.g., and, or, because), when you want to show a relationship between them—a closeness in meaning, a cause, or a consequence.
2. **EXAMPLE:**
  - Stanley wouldn't tell on us; he was a wimp.
  - I wasn't worried; after all, Dad was a good driver.
  - I knew the conversation had to happen sometime; maybe this was the moment.
3. To avoid confusion in lists that already contain commas.
4. **EXAMPLE:**
  - We read the poems "Workshop," "Litany," and "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins; "The Osprey," "White Eyes," and "Starlings in Winter" by Mary Oliver; and "American Heartbreak" and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes.

## Colons Signal Readers

A colon tells a reader to get ready for what comes next: a list, a long quotation, or an explanation. A colon can also cue a reader that what is to come is closely related to what came before. It's more formal than a dash and stronger than a comma. A colon signals a stop that's almost as strong as a period. Remember that the phrase that precedes the colon must be able to stand on its own or you can't use the colon!

### Use a colon

1. To that a list or series is coming.
2. **EXAMPLE:**
  - I packed everything I needed for a night away from home: nightgown, toothbrush, a good novel, and warm socks.
3. To signal that a long quotation is coming.
4. **EXAMPLE:**
  - Writer Robert Cormier views perseverance and desire as more crucial than talent: "If you have a minimum of talent, but you sit at that typewriter long enough, something will emerge. All I had was this burning desire to be a writer and all these emotions."
5. To signal that an explanation is coming.
6. **EXAMPLE:**
  - Writing isn't a social activity but a solo act: writers need to be able to be by themselves, with pen and paper, for long periods of time.

- Note: If the group of words that comes after the colon, as in example #3 above, is a complete sentence, you may start it with a capital letter, e.g., Writing isn't a social activity but a solo act: Writers need to be able to be by themselves, with pen and paper, for long periods of time.

## To Dash or Hyphen? That Is the Question

A hyphen shows connection. It comes from a Greek mark meaning "together, in one." The hyphen functions as a spelling mark. It shows that a word has been split, or that two or more words have been joined to make a new one. In appearance, a hyphen is half as long as a dash. In function, it's completely different from a dash.

### Use a hyphen

- When splitting a word of more than one syllable and more than five letters between lines of text, using the syllabication shown in the dictionary.
- On a compound name: Atwater-Rhodes.
- On compound word: good-bye, four-year-old, mother-in-law, merry-go-round, teacher-writer (i.e., equal roles).
- On numbers of two or more words and on fractions: twenty-eight, one-fifth.
- To indicate a span of time, a span of pages, or the score of a game: November-March; pages 21-37; final score of 28-7.
- To form a compound adjective that comes before a noun: snow-covered lawn, wide-eyed expression, after-school sports.

A dash shows meaning—that is, a break, shift, or interruption in meaning. As a punctuation mark, it's more forceful than a comma, not as formal as a colon, and more natural than parentheses. In appearance, it's twice as long as a hyphen. To type a dash on our computers, hold the shift key and the option key, then hit the hyphen/dash key.

### Use a dash

- To indicate a sudden break, a pause, or a change in the action or feeling.
- EXAMPLE:**
  - He reached the bottom of the stairs—and his blood froze.
- To emphasize a meaning.
- EXAMPLE:**
  - "At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
  - Almost, at times, the Fool."
  - (T.S. Eliot)
- To indicate interruption in dialogue.
- EXAMPLE:**
  - "Okay, let's—" Ms. McClure began.
  - "Is today the deadline for turning in the Rosicrucian permission slips?"
  - Kyle piped up.
- When a colon is too formal.



8. **EXAMPLE:**

- "I stand on top
- of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
- a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage
- pail."
- (Robert Lowell)

**WARNING:** Watch out for overusing the dash and creating too many breaks in the flow of your prose. Don't stick dashes in everywhere, and try not to rely on them to save you when you're not sure how to punctuate.

## Apostrophe Headaches

Is this a spelling mark, like the hyphen, rather than a mark of punctuation? I'm inclined to think so. The apostrophe is mostly used to differentiate plurals (nouns that end in *s* to signify more than one) from possessives (nouns that end in *'s* to signify that someone owns something). Warning: the rules have been known to induce severe headaches.

1. To make a singular noun (the name of one person, place, thing, or idea) show possession, add *'s*.
2. **EXAMPLE:**
  - JFK's assassination
  - dog's breakfast
  - Jimmy's CD
  - a new day's dawning
  - the kid's baseball glove
  - yesterday's papers
  - communism's collapse
  - democracy's promise
  - a witch's cauldron
  - trail's end
3. When a singular noun already ends in *s*.
  - If it's a one-syllable word, most styles add *'s*
    - i. **EXAMPLE:**
      - lass's hair
      - the grass's tender roots
      - Robert Burns's poetry
      - our boss's rules
      - our class's procedures
  - if it's a word of more than one syllable, you can just add an apostrophe, *or* you can add the apostrophe *s* (*I prefer the former*)
    - i. **EXAMPLE:**
      - Dallas' sports teams / Dallas's sports teams
      - Collins' poetry / Collins's poetry
4. When a noun is plural (more than one person, place, thing, or idea) and already ends in *s*, add an apostrophe to make it possessive.

- i. **EXAMPLE:**
  - o the kids' boots
  - o the bosses' secretaries
  - o the Millers' new kitty
  - o girls' basketball team
  - o my grandparents' house
  - o the boys' locker room
  - o our cousins' vacation schedule
- 5. When a plural noun *doesn't* end in *s*, add 's to make it possessive.
  - i. **EXAMPLE:**
    - o children's mittens
    - o men's room
    - o women's clothing
    - o geese's flight
- 6. When possession is shared by more than one noun, use 's only for the *last* noun in the series.
  - i. **EXAMPLE:**
    - o There's Mrs. Johnson, Eric and Alison's mother.
    - o Jacob, Rachael, and Nate's cat Wallace is tough.
- 7. *Some styles* use 's to form the plural (more than one) of a letter, number, sign, or word discussed as a word. Not using 's is equally correct.

**Credit:**

[http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/webpages/jgerstmann/writing\\_and\\_grammar.cfm?subpage=875139](http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/webpages/jgerstmann/writing_and_grammar.cfm?subpage=875139)

## How to Avoid Comma Splices

Definition: A *comma splice* is an error that occurs when a writer attempts to hook two sentences together with a comma.

The comma splice is one of the most common errors sixth grade students make in their writing. As a punctuation mark, the comma is not strong enough to connect to sentences. A comma signals a brief break or pause, but not a complete stop. Remember, the word comma comes from the Greek word meaning "little knife." It's not a big knife. A comma *is* strong enough to connect groups of words, like phrases and clauses, to sentences, but it's *not* strong enough to connect two sentences. When a writer attempts to jam two sentences together by inserting a comma between them, the error is called a *comma splice*, and results in a run-on sentence.

Here are some examples of comma splices:

- The clouds are gathering in the west, it will rain soon.
- I'm crazy about dogs, Golden Retrievers are my favorites.
- I dreamed, around me the night shifted and settled.

There is a test to determine whether a construction is a comma splice or if it is a legal sentence with a comma in it: can the group of words on either side of the comma stand alone as complete sensible sentences? If they cannot, then the sentence is not a comma splice. However, if they can, then a comma splice exists. Below are a few options for correcting comma splices:

- Make a new sentence by adding a period where the comma was: *The clouds are gathering in the west. It will rain soon.*
- Insert a conjunction after the comma: a word that will cement the two sentences into a compound sentence: *The clouds are gathering in the west, and it will rain soon.*
- Use a semicolon to connect the two sentences if you want to show a close connectedness: *The clouds are gathering in the west; it will rain soon.*
- Use a colon to alert the reader that an explanation is coming: *The clouds are gathering in the west: it will rain soon.*

Scour your writing for comma splices, and then experiment with the different ways to fix those splices.

When you write, remember to include commas where they are needed and to omit commas where they are not needed. Here are some rules to remember when you copyedit:

### Some Comma Rules to Remember

1. Use a comma **to separate the elements in a series** (three or more things): *The family needs clothing, food, and shelter.* In fiction, you use a comma before the *and*. In journalism, you do not.
2. **Use a comma + a coordinating conjunction** (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so) **to connect two independent clauses or two complete sentences**: *The owl is a nocturnal animal, and it sleeps during the day. I thought I could stay awake till midnight, but I fell asleep much earlier.* The comma should not follow the *and* or *but* (e.g., *The owl is a nocturnal animal and, it sleeps during the day.*)
3. Use a comma **to set off most introductory phrases**. Here is a simple definition of a phrase: a word group that lacks either a subject or a predicate or both: *Fearing an accident, she drove carefully during the stormy weather, or In a panic, he rummaged through his pockets in search of his wallet.*
4. Use a comma when a **subordinate clause** is as an introductory element of a sentence and modifies a word or words in the main clause: *Although Susan had woken up earlier than usual, she was still late for school.*
5. Use a comma **to set off parenthetical elements**: *The Paradise Bridge, which spans the Petaluma River, is falling down.* A parenthetical element is a nonrestrictive element: a part of a sentence that can be removed without changing the essential meaning of that sentence. The parenthetical element is sometimes called "added information." You can decide whether to use commas in such cases by removing the phrase. If the sentence still makes sense and is complete, you separate the phrase with commas. An appositive, a re-naming or amplification of a word that immediately precedes it, is almost always treated as a parenthetical element. An **absolute phrase** is always treated as a parenthetical element, as is an **interjection**. An **addressed person's name, or vocative**, is also always parenthetical. When both a **city's name and that city's state or country's name are mentioned together**, the state or country's name is treated as a parenthetical element: *Paris, France, is often called "The City of Lights."*

6. Use a comma **with a prepositional phrase** that starts with prepositions that take objects: *about, above, at, before, below*, or as we used to say, to remember: *over, under, around* and *through*: *Before learning to walk, most children first learn to crawl.*
7. Use a comma **before which** but **not before that**: *I studied at the university, which was in town*, or *I studied at the university that was in town.*
8. Use a comma **to separate coordinate adjectives**. You could think of this as "That tall, distinguished, good-looking fellow" rule (as opposed to "the little old lady"). If you can put an *and* or a *but* between the adjectives, a comma will probably belong there. For instance, you could say, *I live in an ancient and run-down house*. So you would write, *I live in an ancient, run-down house.*
9. Use a comma **to set off quoted elements**: *Summing up this her opinion of commas, Gertrude Stein wrote, "... well at the most a comma is a poor period that lets you stop and take a breath..."* If an attribution of a quoted element comes in the middle of the quotation, two commas will be required. Be careful *not* to use commas to set off quoted elements introduced by the word *that* or quoted elements that are embedded in a larger structure. Furthermore, instead of a comma, use a colon to set off explanatory or introductory language from a quoted element that is either very formal or long.
10. Use commas **to set off phrases that express contrast**: *Some say the world will end in ice, not fire*, or *It was her money, not her charm or personality, that first attracted him.*
11. Use a comma **to avoid confusion**. This is often a matter of consistently applying rule #3: *Outside, the lawn was cluttered with hundreds of broken branches* instead of this: *Outside the lawn was cluttered with hundreds of broken branches.*
12. Use a comma for **typographical reasons**: Between a city and a state (*Petaluma, California*), a date and the year (*June 8, 2000*), a name and a title when the title comes after the name (*Mr. Eric Pratt, Professor of Marketing*), and in long numbers (*92,545*). Although you will often see a comma between a name and suffix — Eric Pratt, Jr.; Richard Harrison, III — this comma is no longer regarded as necessary by most copy editors, and some individuals — such as Martin Luther King Jr. — never used a comma there at all.

Credit: [http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/webpages/jgerstmann/writing\\_and\\_grammar.cfm?subpage=875140](http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/webpages/jgerstmann/writing_and_grammar.cfm?subpage=875140)

### Thesis Statements

*A thesis statement in an essay is a sentence that explicitly identifies the purpose of the paper or previews its main ideas.*

#### **A thesis statement is an assertion, not a statement of fact or an observation.**

- **Fact or observation:** People use many lawn chemicals.
- **Thesis:** People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns clean.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **A thesis takes a stand rather than announcing a subject.**

- **Announcement:** The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.
- **Thesis:** Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.

\*\*\*\*\*

**A thesis is the main idea, not the title. It must be a complete sentence that explains in some detail what you expect to write about.**

- **Title:** Social Security and Old Age.
- **Thesis:** Continuing changes in the Social Security System makes it almost impossible to plan intelligently for one's retirement.

\*\*\*\*\*

**A thesis statement is narrow, rather than broad. If the thesis statement is sufficiently narrow, it can be fully supported.**

- **Broad:** The American steel industry has many problems.
- **Narrow:** The primary problem if the American steel industry is the lack of funds to renovate outdated plants and equipment.

\*\*\*\*\*

**A thesis statement is specific rather than vague or general.**

- **Vague:** Hemingway's war stories are very good.
- **Specific:** Hemingway's stories helped create a new prose style by employing extensive dialogue, shorter sentences, and strong words.

\*\*\*\*\*

**A thesis statement has one main point rather than several main points. More than one point may be too difficult for the reader to understand and the writer to support.**

- **More than one main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world-renowned physicist, and his book is the subject of a movie.
- **One Main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world renowned physicist.

\*\*\*\*\*

*You can revise your thesis statement whenever you want to while you are writing your essay. Writers often discover what their real purpose and point is in the process of putting their thoughts into words and then reading what they've written.*

Credit:

[http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/webpages/jgerstmann/writing\\_and\\_grammar.cfm?subpage=875146](http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/webpages/jgerstmann/writing_and_grammar.cfm?subpage=875146)

## *Who or Whom?*

The word “who” is often incorrectly used where “whom” is appropriate, and people seem to avoid “whom” in spoken English completely, but “whom” does have a specific purpose. While these two words are similar, they are as different as “he” and “him,” which are the words to which they are linked.

### *He or Him?*

Understanding “He” and “him” is the key to understanding our “who” and “whom” dilemma, so let us lay a foundation with a quick grammar refresher.

He went to the pizza shop.

Bob went with him.

He also took the dog with him.

When he got there, a duck was in the parking space he wanted, but it did not stress him, and he parked elsewhere.

## **The Key**

“Who” fits any hole where “he” fits, and “whom” is used wherever “him” fits. To better remember this little grammar rule, mind the -m. **Him** is to **whom** as he is to who. If necessary, move the words around to feel the sentence out.

**Who or Whom** ate my pizza?

Change it to a statement: “He ate my pizza.” The correct sentence: “Who ate my pizza?”

With **who or whom** did you eat the pizza?

Bob surely helped to eat that pizza, so move the words around. “The pizza was eaten with him.” “Whom” is used where “him” fits (there is that -m), so “With whom did you eat the pizza?” is the solution.

## **Memory Tip and Quiz**

Try some for yourself, and mind that -m!

1. For who or whom is this pizza party being held?
2. Who or whom ordered one with peppers?
3. Who or whom is taking leftovers home?
4. Who or whom wanted extra onions, and with who or whom is that person riding home?

### **Answers**

1. Him; “For whom is this pizza party being held?”

2. He; “Who ordered one with peppers?”
3. He; “Who is taking leftovers home?”
4. He and him; “Who wanted extra onions, and with whom is that person riding home?”

## Plurals and Possessives

“They” and “them” are the plurals of “he” and “him.” They work the same way, and you can still count on the -m to help you out. “Who” links to “they,” and “whom” links to “them.”

**Who or Whom** is still at the party?

For **who or whom** are all these party hats?

“They” are still at the party, so “Who is still at the party?” The hats are for “them,” so “For whom are all these party hats?”

The possessive form of “who” and “whom” is a cinch; there is only one, and it is universal: “whose.” The only issue with “whose” is a tendency to confuse it with “who’s,” which is a contraction of “who” and “is.”

Whose dog is eating the bread sticks, and who’s not getting any leftovers to take with them?

These words can also have “ever” tacked onto them; can you use “whoever” or “whomever”? Try using each of these words in sentences using the rules you have just learned.

### Additional Practice

*Fill in the blanks using one of these words: who, whom, whoever, or whomever.*

- To \_\_\_\_\_ did you hand your ticket?
- \_\_\_\_\_ will you interview first?
- \_\_\_\_\_ is going to take out the trash? You may ask \_\_\_\_\_ you want to accompany you.
- \_\_\_\_\_ baked the cookies is a genius.
- I cannot recall \_\_\_\_\_ the 30th President was.
- Give the extra goods to \_\_\_\_\_ asks for them first.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is making all that noise?
- The police officer unjustly wrote up \_\_\_\_\_ he wanted.
- To \_\_\_\_\_ shall I make out this check?

Credit: [http://msmcclure.com/?page\\_id=16137](http://msmcclure.com/?page_id=16137)

### Homonyms

Homonyms are words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings. Homonym means, literally, “same name.” Improper use of a homonym is a spelling error with extreme consequences (e.g., being hung from the ceiling by your toenails).

## Commonly Misspelled Homonyms: Definitions and Examples

**THEIR** — Belongs to a them (The teacher stole *their* M&M's.)

**THEY'RE** — They are (*They're* the world's best candies.)

**THERE** — In that place; as an introductory adverb. (*There* they are: on the teacher's desk. *There* can never be enough M&M's.)

**TWO** — The number (*Two* or three packages of M&M's provide a nutritious after-school snack.)

**TOO** — In addition (ALSO) **or** more than enough (He, *too*, eats *too* many M&M's.)

**TO** — Preposition meaning “toward” or used with the infinitive of a verb (I'm going *to* M&M heaven, where I'm going *to* eat many M&M's.)

**YOUR** — Belongs to a you (*Your* M&M's are my M&M's.)

**YOU'RE** — You are (*You're* in my power; hand over your M&M's.)

**ITS** — Belongs to an it (The dog ate *its* M&M's and wanted mine.)

**IT'S** — It is (*It's* that kind of day when I crave M&M's.)

### Homonym Review: Their, There, and They're

Test your knowledge of *their*, *there*, and *they're* by using the appropriate homonym in each blank.

- \_\_\_\_\_ aren't any pencils left in the cup.
- They think \_\_\_\_\_ so cool.
- \_\_\_\_\_ excited about the tofu dessert, poor things.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is my favorite kind of car.
- I like \_\_\_\_\_ Lear jet; it's cute.
- \_\_\_\_\_ hermit crab escaped.
- \_\_\_\_\_ playing Ultimate Frisbee.
- Don't go \_\_\_\_\_ without a bodyguard.
- They think \_\_\_\_\_ going to get away with it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ pet rat, which \_\_\_\_\_ taking to Disney World.

### Homonym Review: Its and It's and Your and You're

Test your knowledge of the homonym pairs *its/it's* and *your/you're* by using the appropriate homonym in each blank.

#### ITS or IT'S?

- The Declaration of Independence draws \_\_\_\_\_ strength from the writing, most of it Thomas Jefferson's.
- The hermit crab finished eating \_\_\_\_\_ dog biscuit.
- \_\_\_\_\_ going to be another cold day.
- I chose this book because I know \_\_\_\_\_ author.
- I don't think \_\_\_\_\_ nice to put your finger in your nose.
- \_\_\_\_\_ funny when she gives people the evil eye.

#### YOUR or YOU'RE?

- Is that a new sweater \_\_\_\_\_ wearing?
- Do you think \_\_\_\_\_ coming to my house after school?
- \_\_\_\_\_ getting on my nerves.



4. Leave \_\_\_\_\_ attitude outside.
5. This isn't \_\_\_\_\_ day, is it?
6. I think \_\_\_\_\_ great.

Credit: [http://msmcclure.com/?page\\_id=6498](http://msmcclure.com/?page_id=6498)

## How to Punctuate Dialogue

Quotation marks began in ancient Greek texts as two curved lines that represented the lips of a person speaking. One curved line was placed at the beginning, as if the writer were saying, “I’m telling you something someone else said.” The other curved line came at the end, to say, “I’ve finished writing the words that came out of the other person’s mouth.”

- **Quotation marks are placed before the first word of a quote and after the punctuation that follows the last word.**
- EX: The teacher said, “In this class there will be no talking, chewing, breathing, unnecessary eye movements, or tap dancing.”
- **A quoted remark begins with a capital letter: it’s the speaker’s first word.**
- EX: I questioned, “Are you up on the furniture again, you bad dog?” She was driving me crazy. I hollered, “Get down now!”
- **A quote is separated from the “he said” part or explanatory phrase with a comma OR a question mark OR an exclamation point, but never with a period. A period would create two sentences and a full stop.**
  - EX: “I just finished reading *I Am the Cheese*,” she remarked.
  - “So what did you think of it?” I asked.
  - “It was excellent!” she effused.
  - I agreed, “I loved it, too.” *Note:* The punctuation that follows a quoted remark belongs inside the closing quotation marks. It’s part of the sentence and shows *how* the speaker said what he or she said. Also note that the first word of the explanatory phrase is *not* capitalized when it follows the quote: “Cheez-Its® are my favorite snack,” she said.
- **In writing dialogue—two or more people having a conversation—begin a new paragraph each time you alternate or change speakers.**
  - EX: “I wish today were Friday,” she said. “I’ve been looking forward to it for months now.”
  - “How come?” he asked.
  - “Because finally, *finally*, I’m supposed to get my braces taken off. At least that’s what my orthodontist promised.”

### An Editing Exercise: Punctuating and Paragraphing Dialogue

Now that you know the rules for punctuating and paragraphing dialogue, edit the selection below, being certain that the dialogue is punctuated and paragraphed correctly.

Within five minutes the snow was falling so hard we couldn’t see the streetlights. I went into full panic mode. Where was my father? My mother said don’t worry—he’s a good driver. He’ll be okay. Do you really think so I asked. Yes I do she said. She put her arm around me and hugged me close to her. Together we stood at the window and watched the storm. Have you ever seen it snow like this before I asked like it will never stop? My mother waited a moment before she answered. Never she said never.

## A Possible Solution

Within five minutes the snow was falling so hard we couldn't see the streetlights. I went into full panic mode. Where was my father? My mother said, "Don't worry—he's a good driver. He'll be okay."

"Do you really think so?" I asked.

"Yes, I do," she said. She put her arm around me and hugged me close to her. Together we stood at the window and watched the storm.

"Have you ever seen it snow like this before," I asked, "like it will never stop?"

My mother waited a moment before she answered. "Never," she said, "never."

Credit: [http://msmcclure.com/?page\\_id=6491](http://msmcclure.com/?page_id=6491)

## Indicating Titles

Another adventure in conventions is how to handle a title when you refer to it in a piece of your writing—whether to quote it, underline/italicize it, or merely capitalize it. As you know, English is as full of exceptions to rules as it is rules themselves.

So, *in general*, the convention is this: put *quotation marks* around the *titles of shorter works* and the *titles of parts of longer works*. These include short stories, poems, articles, speeches, essays, book chapters, and one-act plays. *But* you should also put quotes around the titles of TV and radio shows, as well as shorter musical compositions, like songs and piano pieces.

*As for underlining: now that so many writers compose on the word processor, when a title calls for underlining, and a word processor gives you the capability of italicizing, please italicize.*

So, the general rule is to *italicize* or *underline* the titles of *long works that are complete unto themselves*. These include books, pamphlets, magazines, journals, newspapers, movies, long poems (epic poems or book-length poems; e.g., Homer's *The Odyssey*), plays, symphonies, operas, ballets, and CD's. *But* you should also underline/italicize the given titles of paintings, drawings, and sculptures, as well as the names of ships, aircraft, and spacecraft.

Finally, some literary titles take neither quotation marks nor underlines/italics. These are sacred writings, like the Bible and its books, and the names of series of books. These just require capitalization.

A word about *capitalizing titles*: *capitalize the first word of a title, the last word, and every word in between that conveys meaning*. This means that unless they appear at the beginning or end of a title, you won't capitalize articles (a, an, the), prepositions (about, above, at, before, behind, down, in, near, of, off, on, out, over, to, with, etc.), or short conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, also, as, that).

### Practice with Indication Titles

Try your hand at indicating titles by correctly indicating the titles in each sentence below. Refer to the general rules for titles. Good luck!

1. I hope that you'll read *Cold Mountain*, Charles Frazier's first novel.
2. Our special song is *In My Life* by John Lennon.

3. Someday I'd like to sail to England on the Queen Elizabeth 2.
4. Does anyone here subscribe to Sports Illustrated?
5. Camille loved the Babysitter's Club books when she was in third grade.
6. I have mixed feelings about Queen's Night at the Opera soundtrack.
7. He cut out and saved Frank Rich's column from the Saturday New York Times.
8. The best piece in the exhibit was Picasso's Head of a Woman.
9. The Lottery is recognized as Shirley Jackson's best short story.
10. I memorized Frost's Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.
11. The Book of Daniel appears in the Old Testament of the Bible.
12. They went to Boston to see a performance by the National Ballet Company of Swan Lake.
13. He listens to Fresh Air on National Public Radio on the way home from work.
14. We read Billy Collins' essay The Companionship of a Poem; it was published in The Washington Post.
15. She memorized the complete score and all the dialogue from the Broadway musical Rent.

Kristy Kash Rodriguez, 29 June 2016, EIWP

### Genius Hour

Once again, I sit down to read student essays on topics of their choice, and once again, I get frustrated and bored. Why is it so hard to write something interesting? Why do my students keep choosing topics that aren't original? How can I get them to write and create in a more interesting way? This is continually what I am thinking when my students are composing. I want my students to push themselves and challenge themselves to write something of more interest than rehashing an older argument from another class. This is where my search began.

#### Questions to guide my search

As I started thinking through a multi-genre assignment, I had all sorts of questions. What types of genres do students create? How much do students need to know about the genres? Do we need to do a genre analysis before starting the project? What is a good number of genres to expect students to create? Can they present the projects they create? Are multi-genre projects normally presented? Do I limit the types of genres students can use? What sort of time frame am I looking at for this? How do I effectively grade a multi-genre project? I had a lot of questions.

#### The Search

Originally talking with Kristin Runyon, we discussed the possibility of having students create multi-genre projects based on an assignment I already assign them. I normally have my junior Composition students write an issue/solution/letter to their boss project where they choose an issue in their future field/career. Then they write an essay explaining the issue, research and write about a solution for the issue, and then write a persuasive letter to a "boss" that encourages him/her to adopt the solution. This assignment seemed to naturally lend itself to being transformed into a multigenre project. I started trying to answer my questions by reading through the book *A Teacher's Guide to the Multigenre Research Project* by Melinda Putz. This book had a lot of very beneficial information. If I was fully on board with a Multigenre project, this source would probably have been pretty helpful, but I am still unsure that a multigenre project is what I want to

tackle. There was a lot of information that potentially could help someone get started with establishing a multigenre project, but it was overwhelming for me as a starting point. Sections are divided up very logically and everything is clearly outlined along with handouts for the different steps in a multi-genre project. Again, very helpful if I knew this is exactly what I wanted to do.

I once again discussed with Kristin through my blog my concern about the multigenre project, and she expressed that her plan was to create some kind of multigenre/Genius Hour hybrid. It was at this point that I started looking up what Genius Hour was exactly. I Googled Genius Hour and watched a webinar by A.J. Juliani that introduced what Genius Hour is. He seemed to be something of a professional when it comes to Genius Hour. Juliani's webinar was very beneficial because it explained the basic breakdown of what Genius Hour is exactly and gave ideas as to how it could be used. Actually having students view this webinar would work really well to set up my students to figure out what they are passionate about and really work to create something that illustrates their passions and what they can do with those passions. This was a good starting point to fully spark my interest in pursuing more fully different ideas of how to implement Genius Hour with my students. The beauty of Genius Hour is that students are not limited to being connected to class. Juliani's video made it clear that the most interesting Genius Hour projects come from student interest, not some mandated thing the teacher puts in place.

The next source I looked into was the Genius Hour website. This site gives some clear basics on Genius Hour. Some of the pages were titled "Making Time for Genius Hour in your Classroom" and "Setting Expectation During Genius Hour." The pages were short and sweet. This gave me some more basic information that is beneficial as a starting point to understand Genius Hour. It felt repetitive of the webinar I had previously watched because it seems that the webinar was a video of the information that is contained on the Genius Hour webpage.

I returned back to Google and stumbled upon Genius Hour Live Binders. This is a website compiled by Joy Kirr that has all sorts of information about and sample examples of Genius Hour stuff. The website is chockful of information that explains what Genius Hour is, why Genius Hour

is beneficial, how to get started with it, and ideas on helping students get started. Under each of these tabs, there are multiple sources from other teachers from all grade levels and all subject areas. The website is almost overwhelming with how much there is to look at. The other issue is that the site isn't very user friendly when it is first pulled up. It took me some time to understand what I was looking at when I clicked on the different tabs and how to best navigate the site to find beneficial information. But once I understood what I was looking at, this is a very helpful site for getting ideas about Genius Hour in my classroom. I need to go back and spend a lot more time looking through all the links Kirr provides and start to more fully solidify in my mind and with a document what I am actually wanting to achieve with Genius Hour and how to get my students on board with it.

The more I look through Genius Hour information, the more I think this would be most beneficial in the Spring semester. Because our classes are only semester long, it would be best to implement this in the Spring after students have had time to ease back into school in the fall. But I can see where doing in this in the fall could pull students back into school. If I want to eventually implement the multi-genre project I started to research, it would most likely fit in with junior English. As far as Genius Hour is concerned, I want my seniors to work with Genius Hour to create some kind of culminating project for their high school career. At some point, I could eventually merge the two and create a multigenre/Genius Hour thing like Kristin had mentioned to me previously, but doing them both at once would be nuts.

I returned to Google and searched "How to get started with Genius Hour for high school." This led me to a Google+ site for Genius Hour. While some of this information was helpful, a lot of it was repetitive of what I had already found and read. It did make it clear to me who the Genius Hour gurus seem to be: Joy Kirr, the person who runs Genius Hour Live Binders, and A.J. Juliana. There wasn't much new information on the site, so I didn't find it particularly helpful.

One of the final sites I looked at during my research was Start of Computer Classes. This has a Genius Hour Sessions tab that is very helpful with clearly breaking down 4 clear guidelines

to use with Genius Hour. This was basic information that can be helpful to use when starting to implement Genius Hour in my classroom. The guidelines or rules could be actually given to my students when I am introducing Genius Hour to help them start thinking about what Genius Hour is and all the potentials Genius Hour has.

### Conclusion

The benefit of Genius Hour is that it allows students to focus on what interests them. Their projects do not have to be classroom- or school-related while still getting students to think critically through a topic. Many of the skills I expect my students to have when they finish high school are skills they have to showcase while creating, researching, and producing their projects. I need to look back through the Genius Hour Live Binders site to get a fully understanding of what all is out there and to start creating handouts for my students to introduce them to Genius Hour. After I have set a basic structure for Genius Hour with my students, the Live Binders site has ideas on how to get students thinking complexly about their projects. There is also help on the Genius Hour website for ideas on how to get students thinking about project proposals.

As students are working, we will have to set up due dates and specific guidelines for what students should be accomplishing each week. Students will get one class period each week to work, as long as they are fully working during that time. If students create a complex project, they should need all the work time to get their project completed. In theory, there is a possible way to connect Genius Hour and a multi-genre project, but doing both at once for the first time would be a scheduling nightmare that would end badly for everyone. So for this round, focusing on having students think critically and working on something of interest to them is a much larger win for increasing student interest than having students spit information back out to me using different genres.

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To be honest, I haven't formally taught writing in my classroom for many years. I schedule time in the day for it, but never seem to get to it. It's always the first thing to go when we are short on time. Last month, my principal handed me a brand new copy of the Lucy Calkins "Units of Study" writing curriculum. So...it's time! But, where do I start? I have made a commitment to protect my writing time in the same way I do math and reading time. To do this, I think the best place to start is to figure out why writing is important to me and my students.

My "Why"...

I have always seen the importance of teaching reading and math in my classroom, but haven't committed time or effort to writing. This changes now...not just because writing is a huge part of the Common Core State Standards, but because my students must know how to write and be comfortable doing so. Just like reading and math, students will be required to write every day in their lives. The expectations laid out in the Common Core State Standards are realistic and I will implement them in my classroom. It is also my responsibility to other teachers to equip my students with the essential skills that they need as they move to the next grade level. After all, it is



never too soon to focus on college and career readiness. I owe it to my students to teach writing...plain and simple, this is my “why”!

My commitment to writing means that I will carve out 50-60 minutes a day for Writer’s Workshop. But...what does this mean??? Having my students write a summary of the book they’re reading? Telling them to narrate a story using their spelling words? Daily journal writing? I know that’s what I USED to call writing, but from my new understanding of writing instruction, that’s not going to cut it!

So, instead of weaving writing into the other subjects and calling it writing across the curriculum, I need to explicitly teach writing. This will ensure I am doing justice to my writing time. I still want to incorporate themes from our current ELA curriculum, but I will definitely have a separate time slot devoted to writing. I have found several instructional approaches to the writing process in my research. The one that I have chosen to follow is the “Demonstrate, Scaffold, Release to Write Approach” (Calkins and Cunningham 26). The gradual release of responsibility model ensures that my students will not be dependent on me to write. I want to give them the tools they need to be writers and lifelong learners. Students can first learn from a demonstration (explicit instruction), then from guided practice (scaffolding lessens over time), and then independent work (with plenty of feedback). With the research that I’ve done and this new comprehensive curriculum, I feel confident in my abilities to plan lessons with instruction, lots of writing time, clear goals, and feedback.

Since I have never planned for a block of writing time in my day, I had to ask myself, “*What are the essential components of Writer’s Workshop?*”. I came up with these basic parts to include in my daily writing block: mini-lesson, independent writing, partner time, and sharing. After researching each of these, I have a vision of how I will structure this time in my day.

Calkins suggests starting out each day’s writing workshop with a mini-lesson that lasts around ten minutes before sending students off to work on their own (Calkins and Cunningham 50). For this short mini-lesson time to be effective, I have to establish expectations from the

beginning and make it interesting enough to hold students' attention. The curriculum that I will be using provides a detailed model of these lessons, but they are not meant as a script. Upon reading the first lesson, I am excited that it is written with such precise detail. I will not follow it word for word. Instead I will make it my own, but I see this as such a positive component of a curriculum. Students need consistency across grade levels, and this is provided. As suggested in the book, "A Guide to the Common Core Writing Workshop", the mini-lesson should be an explicit instruction time for me to talk and students to listen with little or no discussion (Calkins and Cunningham 50). I will equip them with a skill that they will take away and use in their writing. I learned from my friend, Michelle, they may not necessarily use this skill immediately. Often they will save it in their toolbox and use it at a later time when it's appropriate (Englund). As one teacher suggests, it will be necessary to set aside a few minutes in the day for reading aloud mentor texts, as it is not to be done during this short block of mini-lesson time ("Launching").

The bulk of time in Writer's Workshop will be spent writing independently. Students write while I provide support to individual writers in the following ways; table conferences, small group instruction moving to students, individual conferences at tables, and conference records. It is my plan for independent writing to last for thirty minutes. I am aware that we will have to build stamina at the beginning of the year. I cannot expect a third grader to write independently for thirty minutes when they haven't done this in second grade. I know that the beginning of the year is the perfect time to set expectations and teach solid routines so that my time can be devoted to assessing, coaching, scaffolding, and teaching...not redirecting. This will be done through correct and incorrect modeling, anchor charts, and lots of practice followed by reflecting together as a class.

Although short, partner time is an effective part of Writer's Workshop and I will make sure that it happens each day. Students have only five minutes to confer with their writing partner, but this collaboration time is so important to the classroom environment. Writing partnerships provide students with an audience for their writing. These partnerships will last for six weeks which is the

length of each writing unit. This ongoing relationship will help students get to know each other and become comfortable making and accepting suggestions for writing improvement. Writing partners are not ability based, but simply two people who can work together (Calkins and Cunningham 44).

Writer's Workshop will conclude each day with a share session. With only five minutes for this component, I had to do some research as to how I would make it work. I know third graders, and some would take five minutes to read one piece of writing to the class. In her blog post about "The Basics of Writer's Workshop", Mrs. M. gives some great suggestions for mixing it up during sharing time. "Some days they share with a partner, some days to their table group, some days a few students share to the whole class, some days everyone shares to the whole class. I think this helps in keeping things interesting and helping them stay motivated; sometimes I tell them who they'll be sharing to, and other times I don't, so they always have to be doing their best work, and it makes it more exciting to share" ("Apples"). Sharing time will also allow me to see topics that may need addressed in future mini-lessons.

After researching Writer's Workshop, reading about how other teachers use it in their classroom, and even talking with other teachers, the greatest advice I learned was summarized in one sentence. Steve Peha says, "The best way to teach is the way that makes sense to you, your kids, and your community" (6). I have learned many useful ways to make Writer's Workshop a success in my classroom. Now, I just have to do it! Writing is one of those subjects that affects a learner's ability to succeed in every other subject. I am looking forward to seeing my students (and myself) develop into confident writers as we progress throughout our journey as authors.

My research has been time-consuming, but very worthwhile. I am an idea collector, so I tend to gather lots of approaches before I find what works for me. This is exactly the push I needed to become familiar with Writer's Workshop before the school year starts. Not only have I learned more about writing in my classroom, but my enthusiasm is amped! I am ready for this new adventure.

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## The Immigrant Issue

### *Why?*

I've always despised the term "dirty Mexican." Even before I minored in Spanish as an undergrad, the words turned my stomach. Over the years, those two words were replaced by other, equally offensive, misnomers. "Wetback, greasy spic, and lazy illegal" were whispered by my Spanish students on the days that I talked about culture or other non-language related topics in my Spanish classes. My response fell somewhere on the continuum of a short lecture about being "open-minded," to simply turning on my selective hearing and giving them a reading assignment.

I am quite fortunate to have attended undergraduate school with a good number of Hispanics who grew up in the United States, but had also maintained their ethnicity and culture. Some had been born and raised in Chicago, growing up in the Barrio, and speaking very little (if any) English until they attended Greenville College, a small Christian college in southern Illinois. Others came from El Paso, Texas and literally tutored me in my Spanish classes. I remember

being astonished that these people were as American as me, but had very little command of the “unofficial” language of the United States. It didn’t offend me. It fascinated me. I wanted to learn more about them and their way of life.

So, back to my non-diversity-seeking high school Spanish students. I struggled for years trying to find a way to open their minds to this other world that is being lived right under our American noses. I would tell stories about my Hispanic friends, but my students in rural America were unimpressed. They could see no relevance in their own lives. Now that the immigration issue has moved to the forefront of American politics, I want to grab this opportunity to educate my students on the complexity of this issue. There are lots of opinions; there are lots of schools of thought. Nevertheless, this will be a topic that is going to be moved on politically in the very near future. What better time to give them some perspective on the subject?

My research questions became: Who is affected by immigration? Who/what is affected negatively? Who/what is affected positively? Are there changes that could be made in the policies that might help those affected? Is the current policy a good one that simply needs to be enforced? Wow, did I open a can of worms when I started researching these questions.

### ***The Search***

I started my research by going to Spanish teacher websites that I frequent for lesson plan ideas concerning immigration. Spanish4teachers is the first one I tried. On its site, I clicked the “culture” icon and was taken to a fabulous page filled with all kinds of lessons about Spanish culture -- in Spain as well as in Mexico, Central and South America. None of these lessons, however, approached the subject of immigration. So my next strategy was the same one as every other 15 - 18 year old would use. I googled the term “Immigration Lesson Plans.” It took me to several sites that looked promising if I were teaching the concept of immigration to elementary students because most of the sites taught about all types of immigrants from myriad regions of the world. I was wanting information and ideas for teaching about hispanic immigrants specifically. One of the sources that came up in reference to my search was an article on a website titled,

“Teaching Tolerance.” I went there and found many great links to information about immigrant issues. Of most help were the “related content” at the bottom of the page. “The Human Face of Immigration, Ten Myths about Immigration, and An Educator’s Guide to the Immigration Debate” were just three of the ten links displayed here. I enjoyed reading these ideas and found some of the comments to the blogs humorous and similar to comments I’ve heard people in my community say. I do wonder about the slant of this site. It is owned by the Southern Poverty Law Center and there is obvious exclusion of any opinion aside from its own. The lesson plans themselves were most definitely biased, even if they are factual. Even so, with each click I felt more informed about some of the issues and struggles of immigrants.

It was at this point that I realized that, like the link from the Library of Congress I later found called, “The Immigrant Experience: Down the Rabbit Hole,” researching such a broad topic on the internet was a little like traversing an intricate maze. You better leave breadcrumbs or you are not going to be able to find your way back out.

The Library of Congress website was phenomenal. There is a teacher section filled with resources. One link, “classroom materials,” takes you to “primary source sets, lesson plans, presentations and activities, themed resources, and collection connections.” I spent hours looking at all the material shared here. Within the “themed resources,” I clicked on “Hispanic Americans” and “Immigration.” While I can use many materials from the “Hispanic Americans” section for other units of study in my classroom, the “immigration” one was much more useful for my immigration unit. Within, I found some lesson plans as well as delightful primary sources from newspapers and other public prints. Under “classroom materials,” then “presentations and activities,” then “immigration,” I found a delightful collection of interviews of immigrants by middle school and high school students. You could search any area of the world and find interviews by immigrants from that region. This was incredibly interesting, and I think, something that I can have my students read later in this unit.

I knew that I wanted to use some narratives written by immigrants from mixed-status families for my students to read. The articles needed to be high-interest, as well as within their reading lexile level. This sounds easy, but wasn't. I visited "narrative.ly," as suggested by Kristin. What a great website! I got caught up in reading the struggles and triumphs of immigrants from all areas of the world. Since I was looking specifically for stories about mixed-status Hispanic families, I didn't, however, find any narratives that would be useful in my classroom. I found "Five personal stories of life in mixed-status families" by Leslie Berestein Rojas. Great article, but the stories were really just vignettes --- not long enough to provide reading opportunities for my lesson. I also found a website sponsored by author Raul Ramos y Sanchez called "My Immigrant Story: The story of U.S. Immigrants in their own words." This was filled with personal narratives of immigrants from all over the world. I thought the website was a bit biased since it had a link to an attorney for help with immigration law. I then decided to try to find articles about immigrants from every vantage point, finally settling on three articles that I used in my teaching demonstration. Those three are listed in the works cited page.

In searching for these stories, I found a movie called, "Sin País." With this movie, PBS had developed a lesson plan called "U.S. Immigration Policy Analysis." From this lesson plan, I adapted my teaching demonstration. Within the site, there was a PDF file containing a document called "U.S. Immigration Policy and Mixed-status Families." It had some information about the Mejia family whose lives were highlighted in the video, but very little real information about how immigrants go about becoming citizens or the U.S. Immigration Policy. This took me on the next leg of my journey.

I found the government website called U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency. This is an agency that "enforces federal laws governing border control, customs, trade and immigration to promote homeland security and public safety," according to its website. This agency is known as ICE for short---and my all indications, it lives up to that moniker. Many narratives that I read by Hispanics expound upon the cold heart of this organization as they search

out illegals in many parts of the border states. The website, which included links titled “newsroom” and “information library,” detailed recent arrests, an ICE most wanted list, and a detainee locator among other informative links.

My search for ICE also took me to a great music video and song called “ICE El Hielo” written and performed by La Santa Cecilia. The lyrics ruminate about the struggles of illegals with the chorus repeating,

*“El hielo anda suelto por esas calles.*

*Nunca se sabe cuando nos va a tocar.*

*Lloran, los niños lloran a la salida,*

*Lloran al ver que no llegará mamá.*

ICE is loose over those streets. [\*ICE = Immigrations and Customs Enforcement; ice = *hielo*]

We never know when we will be hit. [\*alt. We never know when it will be our turn.]

They cry, the children cry at the doorway,

They cry when they see that their mother will not come back.”

The video features illegal actors and actresses and concludes with links to an immigrant advocacy website. This is a song and video that I think my students would really like to see at some point during this unit.

I then found the official government website for becoming a citizen called U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. This website was actually very helpful and contained information about green cards and exact explanations of the Immigration Policy and how to become a legal citizen. Links included “forms, news, citizenship, green card, tools, and laws.” There were resources and videos available as well as a live chat feature. As a person trying to get unbiased information, I found this most helpful. It also contained study items for the naturalization test in both English and Spanish. During this search I also found a very friendly site titled, “American Immigration Council,” which included an easy to read fact sheet about the U.S. Immigration Policy. This site



also was full of resources for the person seeking citizenship including “resources, issues, research and publications, newsroom, and a blog.” It was loaded with up-to-date articles about new legislation and links to articles about immigration. It claimed to “serve as experts to leaders on Capitol Hill, opinion-makers and the media.”

Unfortunately, some of the best looking resources from the Google page were “not available.” The annotation about one site looked very impressive, complete with links and videos. “Todos Somos Americanos” came up with an error: site not found. Grrrrrr. During my search I also found what I thought was an absolutely perfect story of two sisters, one legal, the other illegal called, “Two Sisters, Two Americas.” As I read the first two pages, I was thinking, “this is awesome -- right storyline, good lexile level, unbiased, fact-based....” Then I got the pop-up that said I need to subscribe to Upfront magazine in order to continue reading. I would have gladly subscribed but the smallest subscription was for 10 magazines since it was intended for classroom use. Frustration!!

### ***What I Plan To Do With This Research***

I suppose my biggest obstacle was finding valid sources that were not biased to one side or the other of the argument. I found it very easy to find resources for the pro-immigration side of the debate. Most articles against immigration were extreme right movements led by the government of Arizona or other border states. I read many informative articles about the immigration issue concerning the hesitation of Americans doing work that the migrants are happy to do. My other struggle originated straight from my own brain. I have a very hard time not reading something that I am interested in. So, as I researched this topic (which is broad, to say the least), I found myself reading articles that were closely related to the debate, but that didn't really further the lesson/unit itself. I became obsessed with immigration and immigrant stories to the point where one day, I literally read so much that I had to take my contacts out at 7 p.m. because my eyes hurt so much! I couldn't read the rest of the night -- and reading is my pastime so I was quite bored until bedtime that night!

What I like most about this assignment is the fantastic works cited page that I will have to refer back to as I finish my immigration unit for my Spanish II class. It is full of sites on which I spent anywhere from two minutes to two hours scouring through. The knowledge I gained about the immigration process will help me to be a more empathetic voter and a more informed teacher when I present these issues to my students.

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### Providing Feedback That Works

When faced with the question: *What challenges do you have with teaching writing?*, a number of ideas (more than I'd like to admit) popped into my head. I immediately thought of "writing as a process" □ a philosophy I love, but don't necessarily implement as much as I should. Using this philosophy, students in my classroom are encouraged to create drafts, rewrite, and edit as much as they feel necessary before turning in their final product. Unfortunately, however, I often find that a student's rough draft looks awfully similar to the final product he or she turns in. Therefore, my first impulse was to research how to make the revision process of writing more demanding and effective for my students. While this was a good start, I felt that part of this responsibility should lay on my shoulders. Since I expect students to use my comments and suggestions to revise their writing, it stands to reason that the problem could be a disconnect between these two processes. That's when it hit me: if I could provide my students with more effective feedback, in turn, the revision process would become easier for them. I also wanted to research a topic that would benefit me as a writing

tutor, since that will be my responsibility as a Graduate Assistant come this Fall; therefore, expanding my knowledge of feedback seemed to make the most sense. My mind made up, I set off to research the best suggestions and strategies to help make my feedback more effective, specifically focusing on feedback for writing.

As a teacher who frequently encourages her students to use *EBSCO* as a research tool, I decided to take my own advice and start my research process here. True to *EBSCO* form, it took a few times of wording and rewording to find what I was searching for, but I finally came across a text that looked promising called "Pre-University Students' Strategies in Revising ESL Writing Using Teachers' Written Corrective Feedback" by Khairil Razali. Even though the title infers that this study was done primarily for ESL learners, one of my mentors had given me a heads up that I could find useful information in these articles, so I decided to give it a read. This article primarily talks about corrective feedback or "providing clear, comprehensive and consistent corrective feedback on a student's grammatical errors for the purpose of improving the student's ability to write accurately (Ferris, 2011)" (Razali 1168).

This type of feedback can be delivered verbally or through writing; however, the author brings up a good point that providing written corrective feedback allows individualized teacher-to-student communication that is not always possible in a large classroom setting. For instance, I have tried using verbal feedback during formal paper units, but I quickly discovered that there is just not enough class time to be able to talk to each one of my students about every error in their writing. Therefore, in the case of large formal writing assignments, written feedback would be the best option. According to this article, there are also two categories of corrective feedback: comprehensive vs. selective and explicit vs. implicit (Razali 1169). In a nutshell, comprehensive feedback corrects *every* error in a student's writing, while selective feedback targets specific errors only.

One researcher pointed out that selective feedback can be more useful because students are able to view multiple corrections on a single error (Razali 1169). Just as repetition can help a student learn a piece of information, seeing the same correction multiple times can help a

student remember this correction the next time he or she starts to make that error again. While this article mainly talks about grammatical errors, selective feedback could also be useful when I'm trying to focus on a certain skill. For instance, many of my students struggle with the skill of integrating quotes into their writing. If I gave them a writing assignment and only provided feedback on how well they implemented this skill, it would be more effective than commenting on every aspect of their writing.

Moving on to the second category of corrective feedback, explicit feedback is correcting the error for the student so he or she knows exactly how to fix the error; whereas implicit writing just underlines, circles, or highlights an error, so students know it is wrong, but they have to figure out how to fix it on their own. One research found that students favored implicit writing, while another study found that participants showed a reduction of errors in writing when implicit written correction was used (Razali 1170). Implicit feedback seems to be more effective because it requires more thinking and reflection from the students. For instance, I sometimes use the "suggestion tool" as explicit feedback when my students complete their writing on a Google document. With this tool, it's easy for me to "suggest" where the student needs to put in or take out a comma, semicolon, period, etc., but all he or she has to do is "accept" the suggestion without even thinking about why this correction needs to be made.

With implicit feedback, students are required to think for themselves to solve the problem, which proves more effective in the long run. Based on the information I gathered from this article, verbal feedback can be useful in a one-on-one setting such as tutoring, but written feedback on formal papers would be the best option to use in a large classroom setting. Also, when providing students with this written feedback, the most effective types of feedback are selective and implicit.

As I continued reading Razali's journal on written corrective feedback, I decided I wanted to further explore the discussion of when to use written feedback versus when to use verbal feedback. Therefore, I started a traditional Google search on "verbal feedback vs. written feedback." During my search, I came across a book by Susan M. Brookhart called *How to Give*

*Effective Feedback to Your Students*. Luckily, I was able to find a few of the chapters in this book online. In Chapter 2, "Types of Feedback and Their Purposes," Brookhart discusses three modes of feedback: written, oral, and demonstrative. Similarly to Razali's research, Brookhart recommends using oral feedback whenever time permits, since "some of the best feedback can result from conversations *with* the student" (Brookhart 5). However, since teachers don't have time to talk to their students about everything, written feedback must be used regularly as well. Brookhart also suggests that teachers should consider their students' reading ability when deciding whether to give oral or written feedback (Brookhart 5). While some students may be able to read and comprehend their teacher's written feedback with ease, other students may have a difficult time interpreting the comments.

With this in mind, I need to differentiate my feedback process more in the future. Rather than trying to give verbal feedback to all of my students, I can focus my verbal feedback on students who struggle more with reading comprehension and provide written feedback to my higher level students. Brookhart also points out another good way to determine if the feedback needs to be orally communicated: if the comments take more words to make clear than what the student has written, then it's probably a good idea to talk to them one- on- one about the suggestions (Brookhart 5). Considering the amount of feedback I sometimes put on my students' papers, this is a good tip to follow. Speaking of the amount of feedback, this is another topic Brookhart discusses in her book. Her discussion of this topic quickly caught my attention as this is something I have always struggled with. Brookhart mentions that "a natural inclination is to want to 'fix' everything you see," and this is an inclination I can certainly relate to (Brookhart 2). Instead, she suggests considering the following three things:

1. The topic in general and your learning target or targets in particular
2. Typical developmental learning progressions for those topics or targets
3. Your individual students (Brookhart 2)

To do this, she mentions that we must see things from a student's eye. As simple as it seems, this is a great tip. I think sometimes I fall into the trap of thinking that just because I

know what I am trying to say that my students will completely understand what I am trying to say as well. Brookhart discusses the importance of making sure students have a clear understanding of what they are supposed to do next with the points the teacher has commented on (Brookhart 3). When there is too much feedback on a student's paper, they probably don't even know where to start. This is why it is also important to know your students; some students can handle more feedback than others. According to Brookhart, it's better to just comment on 2-3 main points of a student's writing; then, once these points are fixed, students can move on to a new 2-3 points (Brookhart 3). Following this structure then lends itself to teaching writing as a process. If students are continually revising their writing one point at a time, they will come to value the writing process more. In the end, that is what I am ultimately striving for.

At this point in my research, I felt that I had found a good amount of information on the different modes of feedback and the amount of feedback I should be giving, but I still wanted to discover some useful strategies to use, so I continued my Google search and searched "strategies for giving effective feedback on student writing." The first useful site I found was titled "Give Your Students Better Writing Feedback. A practical guide for instructors" by Colin Monaghan. While this site provided many suggestions on how to provide feedback, I was either familiar with or already implemented a lot of the tips discussed on this site.

One topic that did catch my attention, however, was the author's comparison between error correction and content critique. Error correction emphasizes "how you write," while content critique focuses on "what you write" (Monaghan 6). Monaghan recommends for teachers to emphasize the content critique more than error correction in their feedback, which I do; but he also suggests that when one does include both types of feedback, "it's important to clearly divide your comments into one category or the other, and prioritize your content comments over your error corrections" (Monaghan 6). Since I like to comment on both of these categories, I think my feedback would be more effective if I separated the two more. For instance, I could provide my students with one rubric that focuses on content critique and

provide them with feedback on this category first. Then, after revision, I could provide them with another rubric that solely focuses on error correction and only comment on these errors.

Monaghan also suggests distinguishing between proximate and holistic feedback when considering error correction and content critique. Proximate feedback is “embedded in the student’s text or in the margins,” whereas holistic feedback displays “your comments as endnotes on the top or bottom of the page” (Monaghan 7). Proximate feedback is more useful when providing error correction, while holistic feedback is more effective when focusing on the content development. According to Monaghan, “studies have shown that proximate comments are easier for teachers, but students prefer holistic feedback because it gives them just a few things to concentrate on as they make revisions” (Monaghan 7).

When I give written feedback, I often combine these two types of comments. While I use proximate feedback for error correction, I tend to comment on these errors at the end of the paper as well; and while I create a holistic response at the end of the paper regarding the student’s content and ideas, I also make these comments in the margins of the paper as I read. I now realize how much time that wastes and how all of those comments are probably information overload for my students. Following Monaghan’s strategy instead would allow my comments to be much more concise and effective.

At this point, although I was feeling satisfied with the great resources and information I had found, I wanted to check out one last source that Dr. Murray had recommended to me, which was the book *More Ways to Handle the Paper Load* by Jeffrey N. Golub. This book primarily focuses on how to spend less time grading papers, which is something I can always get on board with. One of my favorite strategies that this book discusses is allowing students to participate in the feedback process (Golub 4). For instance, the author suggests having students write a note on the back of their paper responding to various prompts before turning in the paper, such as “What is the strongest section of this paper and why?” and “What section of your paper is the weakest, and what might you do to improve?” (Golub 4). This then allows the students’ comments to guide the teacher’s feedback making the process more efficient and



effective. Also, if students are part of the feedback process, they may then learn to value feedback more. Another way the author suggests getting the students involved in the feedback process is by having them provide feedback on the teacher's feedback. After students observe their graded paper, they can then come to class with a list of questions about the teacher's comments. With these questions, they can let the teacher know if the comments were clear, helpful, meaningful, etc. (Golub 114).

This strategy appeals to me because having my students reflect on my feedback seems much more practical than reflecting on my own feedback. Using my students' comments, it would be easier for me to revise my feedback process based on their needs and suggestions. It would also allow me to differentiate my feedback more if my students are telling me specifically what they want from my feedback. This idea also reminded me of a reflective feedback chart I saw in Daniels, Zemelman, and Steineke's *Content- Area Writing* that I would love to use in the future as well. Golub's book has many more useful grading strategies that I could go on and on about, like some awesome peer-editing ideas, but as not all of them relate specifically to feedback, I will keep those strategies in the back of my mind for now.

Overall, my research process has provided me with a seemingly endless amount of information on how to provide effective feedback on my students' writing. Reflecting back on what I've learned, the ideas on how to narrow down the focus of your feedback stick out the most in my mind. Since this is the case, I decided to create my final product based on this information. Rather than using one rubric that I provide my students with at the beginning of a writing assignment, I would like to use multiple rubrics instead, depending on what skills I want my students to focus on for a specific writing piece. For instance, I might use one rubric that focuses solely on using textual evidence. For the first draft, this might be the only content I comment on. Then, I would provide my students with a different rubric for their next draft. This time I might focus on grammar and writing conventions. For smaller writing assignments, I would have only one or two areas of focus that I really want my students to work on. Then, when we get to larger writing assessments, my students and I would both feel more confident

expanding our focus. With this strategy, my feedback would be more clear, concise, and meaningful for my students. I would then continue to ask my students to provide me with feedback on this feedback process as well. As a student and a teacher, this research topic has made me more confident in my ability to provide effective feedback and take advantage when feedback is given to me. In the end, this research has reignited my belief that writing truly is a process, and feedback only allows us to enhance that process even more.

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HannahYeam EIWP 2016

I- Search Paper

### **Classic vs. Contemporary Literature in the Secondary Ed Classroom**

It was the end of the school year, and I had encouraged my team of teachers to reflect on the curriculum and make decisions as to how we could improve some of the activities and assessments implemented this past school year. There are many strengths that I could brag about when it comes to the RTHS ELA Team, but collaboration is definitely at the top. We are very good (for lack of a better word) about meeting together, talking things through, and making collective decisions. This particular case was no different. The teachers immediately found time to collaborate and brainstorm ideas to improve some of the practices that were going on in their respective classrooms. It wasn't until a few days later that one specific group of teachers hit a speed bump in their conversation, and that speed bump was brought to my attention. This gist of the concern was this: "M wants to get rid of 'Romeo and Juliet' and I just don't agree with it.

It's a classic, and we need to keep teaching it!" Even before this teacher brought this concern to my attention, this statement has been one that I've been pondering about for some time. It also serves as the crux of my search for arguments for and against teaching contemporary literature in the secondary education classroom.

Before diving into the Internet, I began my search with asking fellow teachers (and even non- teachers) their opinions on this matter. The responses varied greatly as both teachers and non- teachers came up with arguments that supported replacing classic literature with more more contemporary works to keeping the classics and bringing in contemporary literature when it was possible and justifiable. Some were in favor of bringing in more contemporary literature, but questioning whether or not it was feasible with time constraints. There's also the question of how we keep ourselves from constantly changing texts, considering the limited monetary funds we have as well as the practical struggle of then having to continually update

our curriculum. Relevance was also a strong point of contention as to whether or not that should be a factor in choosing texts, especially when having to deal with Common Core expectations. Was I surprised by the wide range of responses? Not really. In fact, it's what I had expected in the first place. I knew this search may or may not yield concrete results or solutions, but it was still worth it to keep digging and searching for more information.

After conducting this preliminary research with more informal conversations, I then turned to the Internet. Much like the responses I received from my fellow teacher and non-teacher friends, there was a wide range of arguments and rationales supporting both sides that I was able to find. One of the older documents I came across was written in 1997, and the only reason I chose to keep it as part of my works cited is because of the question it poses at the very beginning. “The major question that teachers should address is: *Do Romeo and Juliet, Great Expectations, Julius Caesar, A Tale of Two Cities, The Odyssey, The Red Badge of Courage, The Iliad, Antigone, Oedipus Rex, The Old Man and the Sea and many others found in the English curriculum meet the needs, interests, and abilities of young people in middle and high schools?*” (Bushman 1). This just goes to show that educators have already been challenging the idea of teaching “classics” for some time and has questioned whether or not these texts meets the needs of the students. In order to organize my findings and (hopefully) allow the reader to follow my research and train of thought more fluidly, I organized my research into three different categories, which are as follows: Case for the Contemporary, Case for Classics, and The Most Important Factor: Needs of the Students.

Let's begin with the research I found in favor of incorporating more contemporary literature (or even replacing the classics) in ELA curriculum. One of the most resounding arguments in favor of teaching more contemporary literature is encapsulated in the statement by Greg Toppo (author of “Contemporary vs. Classic”), which is that “Teens can learn as much from contemporary literature as from classics”. This is probably in response to the most consistent concern with teaching contemporary literature, which is that educators feel they

don't hold as much "sophistication" or "literary merit" as the classics. Young adult literature (YAL) is often stereotyped as focusing on "teenage angst" and being limited to novels (Gibbons 55). In other words, contemporary literature lacks in substance, breadth, and is unable to generate conversations and the analysis that students should be exposed to at the middle and high school level.

However, what I (and other educators) have witnessed is just how much young adult literature has changed and evolved over the years. "[YAL] has grown expansively to include genres such as poetry, biographies, memoirs, informational texts, and science fiction and fantasy, to name a few" (Gibbons 55). The aforementioned list doesn't include graphic novels either, which has also increased in production and implementation into classroom curriculum (including my own school building). Therefore, the argument that YAL lacks in variety and depth isn't the strongest (or even most valid) one to date. In fact, the changes in curriculum and related literary texts has swung toward more modern, multicultural novels written in the same lifetime as the students rather than reverting back to teaching the classics (Eldeib). Works being written in the younger generation's lifetime matters since there's a greater chance students can relate to it and be more engaged with that text. This engagement with the literature, "...insures introspective writing, lively discussions, and perhaps most importantly—the students will keep reading, long after the required selection has been finished" (Gibbons 53). The argument here is that due to its ability to engage students, contemporary literature has a greater chance of influencing students to keep reading beyond the classroom. I don't believe any ELA teacher would be opposed to that!

After discovering research that proposed good reasoning to incorporate more contemporary literature in the classroom, I wasn't sure if I would find any recent articles or research that would be in favor of keeping the classics. If I were to be completely honest with myself, I'm definitely in the camp of keeping classical literature in the classroom as opposed to getting rid of it completely. The main argument that one of my teachers had for taking "Romeo and Juliet" out of the curriculum was that the students don't relate to it

anymore. Duaa Eldeib (author of “High School Reading: Classics or Contemporary?”) states that whether we “love it or loathe it, Shakespeare's ‘Romeo and Juliet’ has served as a rite of passage for high school students for generations”. My own personal interpretation of this “rite of passage” is the understanding that the Romeo and Juliet plot serves as the foundation for so many tragic love stories, past and present. “These texts also show themes that are still prevalent today in young adult literature” (Emig 3). I still believe that teaching students the origins of a storyline is important, so they can learn and witness how major literary ideas have changed and evolved over the years.

In addition to many classical texts serving as the foundation for many stories today, the classics also allow students to be exposed to much more. “Reading the classics allows one to be exposed to different cultures from around the world and of the past” (Emig 3). Even if classical texts tend to be much older and may seem outdated and irrelevant, they help us learn about the culture and people who lived during specific time periods outside of having to read a history textbook. Granted, the language may be a little more difficult to grasp, but “...studying classic literature from the Western canon (Shakespeare, Dickens, Orwell and so on) affords students of English the opportunity to understand, analyse and evaluate language quite different from their own” (Law). Meaning, classical texts challenge students to wrestle with unfamiliar nuances of the English language which isn’t necessarily a drawback in my opinion. Having to take the time to breakdown and understand a single statement is able to teach the valuable lesson of the power of words and the weight they can hold.

I could probably go back and forth for an eternity sharing the benefits and drawbacks of both incorporating contemporary literature and limiting classical literature, but what I have to keep reminding myself is what’s most important here. It’s the needs of students and more specifically, the needs of MY students! During my research, I also came across an article that included three different opinions from high school students in Michigan. Each of the following comments gave me a chance to humanize some of the research I was finding:

*“It doesn’t seem productive to expose students to archaic English when many do not even have a firm grasp on the language they use every day” (Jeromey Mann, high school senior).*

*“Just as the classics cannot be touched by today’s authors, contemporary literature is in a league of its own. Older authors haven’t been through the same experiences, the same changes that modern authors have” (Catey Koch, high school junior).*

*“However, fears of offending people and a preference for orthodoxy have restricted courses from teaching literature written in the last 50 years. Literary history does not end with “The Great Gatsby,” and students need to learn that” (Patrick Sutherland, high school senior).*

Of course, three interviews may not seem like enough supporting “evidence”, but they each shared an important aspect regarding what this research was about and gave me a glimpse into the psyche of a teenager today. When I was in high school, I didn’t really question what my English teachers gave me to read. In college, I was an English major and accepted the fact that I would have to read a wide selection of both past and present texts. Of course, I can’t say that these three teenagers could (or should) represent the majority of adolescent opinions, but they still provide some keen insight worth noting.

In my honest opinion, I believe that one of the strongest barriers that keeps us educators from incorporating more contemporary literature is the scary acronym comprised of four letters. Yes. The CCSS (also known as the Common Core State Standards). In an *English Journal* article I came across, “What *The Hunger Games* Can Teach Us about Disciplinary Literacy”, Jane M. Saunders sums up what school leaders and teachers tend to struggle with when it comes to implementing the CCSS. There are always “...concerns about ‘covering the curriculum’ rather than discussing ways to deepen students’ understandings of the various contents and helping match learning in schools to the interests students carry with

them ...” (42). I find this statement to be true of teachers in my building and myself as well. We do spend a good chunk of time and energy wondering and worrying about whether or not we have enough time to cover the material that we believe we should instead of creating more avenues for our students to grow in their learning.

When I continued to peruse through a pile of *English Journals*, I came across an article that I didn't realize at the time would provide me additional insights to my topic. In her article, “Reimagining the Role of the Reader in the Common Core State Standards”, Ellen C. Carillo challenges the CCSS' definition of the student- reader and believes it needs to be rethought. “The Common Core's conception of reading is an unfortunate throwback to a time wherein texts were situated as stable repositories of meaning” (Castillo 31). To me, this refers to the fixed lists of recommended texts that the CCSS gives educators to use within our curriculum. Over the years, I've scanned through these lists wondering (and hoping) about any changes and find that there hasn't been much over the years.

In actuality, I've found that there have been texts that we have chosen to teach at grade levels contrary to the ones recommended by CCSS. It did concern me at the time, and I questioned whether or not we should change the primary texts. We ended up not changing the texts because we realized that those recommended texts were just that. Recommended texts. I still stand by that decision even now. I really appreciate Castillo's insight that “rigor...need not be cast in opposition to these reader- oriented practices” (Castillo 32). Reader-oriented practices focus on who the reader is and what would best interest and engage them while teaching them the necessary skills that they need. I admit that there has been more than one occasion when I've chosen a challenging text for the sake of it being more challenging rather than choosing one that would best generate discussion and critical thinking. Just because a text is “more rigorous” or “more difficult” for a student to understand the first time around doesn't mean it's the best choice at that time. Rigor doesn't need to only come in the text itself but can manifest itself in the way the text is approached and handled by the teacher.



Oftentimes, I have found myself using rigor as the very reason to keep classical texts in our ELA curriculum, but over time (and also the reinforcement of this research), I've concluded that there is more to the classics than that reason alone. It also shouldn't be the sole reason in teaching the classics. Personally speaking, my students have benefitted from wrestling with authors such as Sophocles, Homer, William Shakespeare, the Bronte sisters, Ralph Waldo Emerson, etc. and felt much more confident in their reading and writing skills because of it. Not only have their skills improved, but they gain knowledge about different time periods and cultures as well. "...[W]e must safeguard the teaching of classic literature or risk depriving our young people of the wealth of knowledge, enjoyment and sense of heritage and history to be gained from our classics..." (Law). There is still value and merit in continuing to teach the classics and doesn't need to be eliminated completely.

With that previous comment, I now head into some concluding thoughts I discovered along the way (and will possibly continue to discover in my career). There is no concrete answer to as to whether or not teaching contemporary literature is better than teaching classical literature and vice versa. One of the main explanations behind this finding is that there really isn't enough information out there that gives us an all-inclusive answer or solution. "There is not an abundance of research on how to integrate both young adult or contemporary literature with the classical or canonical works that are typically used in the classroom" (Emig 1). I believe this is due to the fact that the world - yes, the world - is always changing. People and societies are always changing. Cultures are always changing. All of these changes influence how we think, learn, and make decisions at any given moment in time. Some pieces of literature (classical or contemporary) will lend itself better in the classroom depending on what's going in students' (and teachers') lives.

At the end of the day, does it really matter what text I use in the classroom? The knee-jerk reaction that even I would give is "yes" and then after a minute..."no". Yes, I have state and national standards to uphold. Yes, I will be evaluated and scrutinized for my

curricular choices. Yes, I have to consider the educational value of the texts I'm wanting to provide for my students. However, I do believe that "any text, if taught well, will engage on some level or another" (Law). The longer I teach, the more I believe that it's more about how I teach a skill, concept, idea, etc. rather than what specific text I use. I have to be willing to live with my choices and defend them, and right now, I am.

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