

Teacher to Teacher

Ideas that Work

From the New York City Writing Project



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A series of horizontal yellow lines for writing, arranged in a column on the right side of the page. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page, providing a template for handwritten notes or answers.



Dedication

To Ed Osterman, New York City Writing Project teacher-consultant, associate director, and listserv coordinator, whose belief in the depth and breadth of teacher knowledge emanates from these pages.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank everyone who made this publication possible. Ed Osterman's leadership nurtured the development of our listserv's close-knit community, something many of us would not have believed possible in cyberspace. Marcie Wolfe, Director of the Institute for Literacy Studies and Nancy Mintz, Director of the New York City Writing Project, originated the idea for this book. Anne Campos, Associate Director of the Institute for Literacy Studies, supervised production and gave shape to the design. Tyler Schmidt, Program Coordinator for the New York City Writing Project, offered invaluable editing advice. And though there are too many of you to mention individually, I want to extend my most heartfelt thanks to all of the members of the New York City Writing Project community, past and present, and especially to my fellow listserv participants.

Katherine Schulten
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About the New York City Writing Project

The New York City Writing Project (NYCWP) has provided support in language arts and literacy education to children, young adults, teachers, and schools since 1978. As an affiliate of the National Writing Project, the NYCWP is part of a nation-wide network of 185 university-based sites which seek to improve K-16 education through professional development, school-based services and research studies in the field of literacy.

The NYCWP bases its work in the belief that the act of writing enables learners to make meaning for themselves and as such is a powerful tool for learning. During summer and school-year seminars and study groups, teachers collaborate with their peers to transform the ways in which writing and reading are perceived, used, taught, and evaluated in urban classrooms. Writing Project programs improve teaching and learning K-12 by supporting public school colleagues who seek to:

- Explore assumptions about language and literacy;
- Investigate the relationships among instruction, assessment, and student performance;
- Build and refine reading and writing skills;
- Examine pedagogy and classroom practices;
- Integrate reading and writing across the curriculum;
- Design teacher-research projects to document successful approaches to writing and learning for diverse populations; and
- Develop capacities to serve as leaders among peers.

The New York City Writing Project is a program of the Institute for Literacy Studies, Lehman College, The City University of New York. NYCWP receives support from CUNY, Lehman College, the New York City Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Education through the National Writing Project, and from a range of additional public and private sources.

For more information about the activities and programs of the New York City Writing Project, please call us at (718) 960-8758, or visit the Institute for Literacy Studies website at www.lehman.edu/litstudies.



About the National Writing Project

The National Writing Project (NWP) is the premier effort to improve writing in America. Through its professional development model, NWP builds the leadership, programs, and research needed for teachers to help their students become successful writers and learners.

Every student deserves a highly skilled teacher of writing. To that end, each of the 185 NWP sites, all located on university campuses, conducts an annual summer institute, attended by the most experienced teachers in the area. Together, these teachers prepare for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective practices, studying research, and improving their knowledge of writing by writing themselves.

After the institute, teachers conduct project-sponsored programs in their own schools and in neighboring schools and districts. These programs have two purposes: developing teacher knowledge and leadership and applying this knowledge and leadership to improve student achievement. Collectively, across 50 states, Puerto Rico, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands, NWP sites conducted 6,482 programs in 2003.



This model of summer and school-year programs, designed and supported by the National Writing Project, is validated by NWP research. NWP sponsors research directed by local sites as well as research targeted at key educational concerns, for example, how to support new teachers or how to support teachers, grades 4-12, in their efforts to improve students' reading and writing for academic purposes. Both local and national studies show positive results in student achievement.

NWP sites serve over 100,000 teachers annually. NWP continues to add new sites each year with the goal of placing the writing project within reach of every teacher in America.

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INTRODUCTION

“Every day in this seminar I have 21 teachers,” a second-year English teacher from one of the new small Bronx high schools wrote, reflecting on her four weeks in the New York City Writing Project’s 2004 Summer Invitational Institute. Anyone who has ever participated in a Writing Project institute or seminar knows exactly what she means. As in any National Writing Project institute around the nation, everyone in the room – including the coordinators – is both a teacher and a learner simultaneously. There is a palpable excitement that occurs when “teachers teach teachers.”

Since 1978, Writing Project teachers have come together across content areas and grade levels in schools all over the city to explore and demonstrate for each other ways to use active, inquiry-based approaches for enhancing literacy across the curriculum. We present best practices, read and discuss professional literature, share resources and materials, and examine and reflect upon student work. Above all, we write regularly: to think, to question, to connect, to imagine, and to celebrate. As a community of learners, we support each other and advance our collective professional knowledge and expertise.



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This booklet, *Teacher to Teacher*, offers some of the best ideas New York City Writing Project teachers have shared with each other over many years of conversation. Initially, these conversations were held primarily in schools or on the campus of Lehman College. But in the past seven years many of our discussions have occurred within an online forum, the New York City Writing Project listserv. The ideas contained in this booklet have been culled chiefly from our listserv, along with additional entries originally published in our newsletter. Overall, *Teacher to Teacher* represents the work of over 50 metropolitan-area teachers and administrators.

The Writing Project listserv has provided a place to continue the kinds of conversations that begin in our summer institutes or inservice forums. These online conversations bring together experienced Writing Project teacher-consultants with teachers new to both the Project and the profession. Teachers use the listserv for a range of purposes: to request help when they are about to teach a new unit or book; identify approaches or materials to support an instructional goal; report on classroom challenges; discuss major professional issues; or simply trade information about valuable websites, cultural events, or exciting new novels.

Though the ideas in this booklet are not presented in their original context – as part of an ongoing, informal online conversation – we hope they make clear some of the values Writing Project teachers hold

most dear. We believe in using writing as a tool for thinking across disciplines and levels. We believe in the power and satisfaction that emerge when writers shape and revise their work over time to arrive at a polished piece that clearly expresses their original intent. We believe in teachers as readers, writers, and lifelong learners. And, perhaps above all else, we believe in teachers teaching teachers.

Teacher to Teacher contains over 150 examples of classroom-tested successes. With topics ranging from teaching Shakespeare, to writing essays, to helping struggling readers, to using drama, art, and technology to engage students, this is a booklet that invites “dipping into” rather than reading straight through. Though the easiest way to use the book may simply be to consult the table of contents, embedded within many entries are references to multiple resources or approaches that may work in other contexts. For example, a suggestion for teaching poetry may also include a particular pedagogical approach that prepares students for specific tasks on the ELA Regents. A unit on a novel or historical period may also provide students with skills promoted by the New York State and City Performance Standards. And while most of these ideas originated in New York City middle and high school English and social studies classrooms, nearly all can be adapted to work in any kind of classroom, no matter what level or subject area.

Since its inception, the New York City Writing Project, like other National Writing Project sites, has honored and promoted the individual voices of classroom teachers who so generously share their work with colleagues at our institutes, seminars, workshops, and conferences. Still, as experienced teachers know, a great lesson is often made from “reweaving” an old idea to fit the needs of a particular class. We have tried to credit our ideas whenever we knew their origins, but, as Elaine Avidon, Lehman College faculty member and former Project director, once wrote on the listserv, “My creativity as a teacher is in reweaving – in taking ideas from others and applying them, using them, and reshaping them in ways that come out of me.”

On behalf of everyone in our community, we invite you to take our ideas and reweave them to make them your own.

Katherine Schulten
Ed Osterman
Teacher-Consultants



WAYS TO BEGIN A YEAR

THE FIRST DAYS

Because we share a common belief in the importance of developing classrooms that foster community, many of us in the New York City Writing Project begin the year with getting to know each other through autobiographical writing. Here are some of our prompts, projects, and techniques:

- **Mapping your life:** In an adaptation of the Writing Project's mapping* technique, Cher Sansone, a teacher with whom I work at Monroe High School of Business and Law, begins her high school classes by asking her students to "map" a year in their lives that was important. They do quite a bit of freewriting* first about what year they might choose and why. Then, the teacher models a map of her own (showing, especially, how the drawings don't have to be "perfect" but can just be stick figures), and gives very open directions: "Represent your world, your friends, and the events in any way you like." After the maps are drawn, students can talk about their maps in partners or small groups, and begin to write autobiographical pieces that are inspired by the maps. (*Barbara Martz*)



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- **More than you'd ever want to know:** With my juniors, I begin with some writing. I tell them I'll be telling them more about myself than they would ever want to know, and then I proceed to do so — from my education and professional credentials to personal information about my childhood and home life. When I finish I distribute a yellow pad to each student. (We call it our Thoughts & Processes Journal; I buy them at Staples, 12 for \$5 — a worthwhile investment of Teacher's Choice money.) Then I ask them to tell me more about themselves than I would ever want to know. Later we begin to connect our writing with the literature we read, comparing and contrasting our own lives to those of the characters (and, if everything goes right, eventually to the life of the author). (*Joe Bellacero*)

- **Interviewing each other:** This idea that I've used comes from one of my colleagues at Evander. He said he had noticed that with high school class sizes being so large, few of the kids know anything about their classmates. This tied in with my own observation that the students often feel alone in the classroom at the beginning of the year. So I pair students at random, give them a set of questions, talk about follow-up questions to get more information, and let them interview each other. (I make up the questions, but you could also have your students brainstorm them.) They take notes (Regents Task One), organize their thoughts into three or more groups, and write a one page account of their partner. They love doing it! Some of the things they write about each other are truly kind, and the writing in general

is some of the most human and least “academic-sounding” I receive. It also gives me insight into the students that I never used to have at the beginning of a term. *(Joe Bellacero)*

- **Press conference:** I have middle school students interview each other, but first I model the interview by having them work in groups to create questions to find out about me. This gives us a chance to hear a few questions before the interview begins and for them to realize that yes and no questions need to either have a follow-up question or be restated. Then I run a press conference with my students as reporters. I tell them that I have the right to refuse to answer questions and forbid them from asking my age. It’s always fun for them to find questions that will eventually lead them to figuring it out. We then move to developing interview questions for each other. The interviews are written up and become part of a bulletin board display along with the Polaroid pictures I take of each student. *(Nancy Mintz)*

- **What I hope to be asked:** One suggestion: when doing interviews, have kids each write down “the question I hope to be asked.” *(Thomasina LaGuardia)*

- **Using photos:** When elementary students interview each other, I have them bring in photographs of themselves. We put the photos and the written “essays” into a photo album that we keep in our library of published class books. *(Laura Schwartzberg)*



PLANNING UNITS

On our listserv we regularly ask each other for help in enriching a theme or topic we are about to embark on in our English or history courses. Though there is not the space here to excerpt any full unit, four general ideas below might be adaptable to your own classroom. In one, a veteran teacher talks about a book that influenced him in planning collaboratively with students; in the next, two other teachers talk about using the same book to guide a research project. In the last two entries, teachers talk about seeing large, chronological units through themes.

- **Planning collaboratively with students:** I have been very influenced by a book I read by James Beane called *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education* (1997). One very practical suggestion that Beane makes is a way to plan collaboratively with students. I’ve done this and it works. He suggests that we pose two questions: “What concerns or questions do you have about yourself?” and “What concerns or questions do you have about the world?” I’ve used a third question as well: “What concerns or questions do you have about others?” From this list, students look for

concerns that have both personal and social importance and that they have in common with each other. This step is not easy to keep collaborative, but as long as themes are always brought back to the questions which students actually write (even when the teacher comes up with the themes) this seems okay to me.

So, for example, our team of teachers is currently planning around a focus, which is NYC/community/ethnic and immigrant groups. We are studying five groups/communities in NYC history: Native Americans, Colonialists, Irish, Jews, and African-Americans. Since many of our students are Hispanic/Latino or Asian and will be doing their own groups/communities, this seemed reasonable to everybody. As we've been planning, we've been trying to come up with a theme that (James Beane-like) is both personally vital and socially important. So far, our brainstorming has included essential questions like the following: Does life thrive or just survive in New York City? (This would allow the science teacher to make a connection here, too.) Is it better to assimilate or separate? Is better to compete or cooperate?

(Paul Allison)



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• **Research project:** Kiran Chaudhuri and I do a research project with ninth graders based loosely on the book *Curriculum Integration* by James Beane (1997). Students generate questions they have about themselves and their world. Then they get into small groups and pick one umbrella question such as, “When will the world end?” “Why do women suffer?” “Why is there racism?” “Does rap cause violence?” or “How do animals communicate?” Each person in the group researches one topic within that question, so in the “Women Suffer” group one person researched rape, another female circumcision, another spousal abuse. One support we add to the process is to do reflection journals along the way, emphasizing the process of researching. We ask students to answer these questions in their journals:

1. What source did you use? (title, author, publication, etc.)
2. a. What information did you find (what three facts/citations can you use?)
b. Why was or wasn't this source useful?
3. What is your next step?
4. How is your topic/question changing?

The research paper then becomes both a traditional research paper and a process piece. I like framing a topic as a question because it helps students avoid plagiarism, and because it inspires them to do different types of research, like interviewing and calling and visiting community organizations. (Jeremy Kaplan)

• **Theme photos:** For ninth-grade humanities, I always begin each unit with three carefully selected photos which contain seeds of the themes coming up in that unit. Students write in response

to them, speculating about what they might “mean.” (Who is this person? What is s/he wearing? etc.) We always conclude the unit by revisiting the photos and the writing done in response to the initial viewing. By the end of the unit, the responses are deeper and more informed. Using that same format for each unit makes the students increasingly responsive to and observant of new visuals.

(Julie Merker)

• **Planning a survey course:** When I work with teachers who are designing a class that covers a lot of material chronologically or that attempts to confront many contradictory questions or themes at the same time, I often suggest concentrating on the ideas of “Community” and “Obligation.” Teachers with whom I have worked have begun their history/literature/humanities classes by discussing definitions of these words, often working visually. For example, they ask groups to “draw a picture of community,” and then they ask if this is a picture of an ideal community or community as it actually exists. Discussing with the students how successfully their groups worked as a community to come to consensus while creating their picture of community is a valuable step, one that could also be a first step for creating a class contract. The class might also look at text or video pieces that define community in many different ways. One of my favorites is the animated film version of Maurice Ogden’s poem, “The Hangman”: just as students drew “community,” here is another picture of a community that collapses because no one will look out for “the other” (the poem was a response to McCarthyism). Hence, it brings you to the theme of obligation: to whom are we obligated? For whom do we care? How do we look beyond our own groups to see others as humans in equal need of respect and caring? How does our community’s sense of obligation and caring reflect the power structure, justice, and hierarchy? How does the community work together and work with other communities? How do we make change in this community? Who are the risk takers, the leaders, the followers, the bystanders? Once these themes are set up, one can move chronologically through time and/or geography asking the same questions: How does this community (e.g., 1920s America, 1930s Germany, 1980s South Africa, 1990s Guatemala) define itself? Who has access to power and why? How has a hierarchy of power, obligation, caring been established? What are the tools used to keep the inertia of this hierarchy going? Who are people within the community who have minority opinions? How is change made in that community? How does that community evolve over time? And of course, the real purpose here is to relate these historical communities to ourselves and our communities now, to look at democracy and justice and individual responsibility in the U.S. and New York today and in ourselves. *(Kevin Feinberg, Facing History and Ourselves)*



WRITING

JOURNALS

Many Writing Project teachers begin with journal writing each day, sometimes on the theme of the lesson to come, but more often simply to help students relax, write about what's on their minds, and become comfortable and more fluent with informal, expressive writing. When students write in journals, we often ask them to "freewrite,"— which means writing non-stop, not worrying about grammar or spelling, just getting down what they're thinking. On the listserv, we've often written of the successes of journals and shared ideas for getting them started and going further with them.

• **Why we do it:** One thing that strikes me over and over as valuable and essential in the school lives of students (and teachers) is journal freewriting. I begin each class session this way. When the principal observed my tenth grade class, she asked why I used journals. I told her it's a way for my ESL students to begin thinking and writing in English without correction, and it allows them to "practice" fluency. No worries or filters, no fears of "Am I saying this right?" But journal freewriting is so much more! It's the way that the student who had struggled with his immigration status all year could write about it, usually in English and sometimes in Spanish. He could keep me abreast of what was going on with him. Although very quiet in class, this student expressed significant anger and frustration in his journal. It was the way for another student to write about issues that she didn't want to speak aloud. It was the way for students to complain, make mistakes and not worry about what others thought or said about them (which is difficult for them most of the rest of the day). I always write along with the students and I, too, benefited from the writing.

Journals are kept in a special place in class and students are told that I will read them, which I do every couple of weeks. Sometimes a student will write something and then pass the journal to me. I'll read and write a response to that day's entry. I do grade the journals; they are a required part of the class. I usually ask students to write a self-evaluation and give themselves a grade for their journals. They grade it and explain the grade. They are often tough on themselves, but they understand how much they've put into the work. I usually give A's provided that students have written each time they are asked to make an entry. At the end of the year, I ask students to write an evaluation of the class. What always strikes me is just how important the journal freewriting is to them. Journals are a way for almost every student to do well. *(Marion Halberg)*



• **Scribbles to figures:** Every – absolutely every – class, workshop, seminar, or study group I teach, lead, co-lead, or facilitate, whether of teachers or of undergraduates, begins with ten minutes of silent freewriting. Every so often we do some process talk afterwards about what it's like to do this. And the process talk that follows is always rich. My co-teacher and I open our teaching seminar every day with journals, and most likely because we never said, "Go and do this with students," of course everyone went and found ways – wonderfully adapted ways – to use versions with their own kids. One of our participating teachers brought in the work of Geraldine, a nine-year-old child who rarely spoke, but day after day scribbled and scribbled. After about two months of this, from her scribbles began to emerge figures; you can literally see them coming out from the scribbles. Four books later the figures are stylistically drawn, dressed, and dancing. The teacher said she never knew the child had all of this in her. And I've watched another teacher use it with his eighth graders at the end of the day to somehow gather in/go forth. The room has an almost spiritual quality with all of the kids focused. Quiet. Something one rarely sees in a middle school. (*Elaine Avidon*)

• **Modeling freewriting:** Many of my middle school students are reluctant writers and it is in them that I have seen journal freewriting especially act as a spark. To get them started, one day early in the semester, I begin freewriting on the blackboard as they enter. I don't stop. I just keep on going. It's hard on my arm! I don't talk to them – very unusual for me – I just keep writing. They eventually get quiet and start commenting on what I'm doing. Then I stop and we brainstorm a list of what they observed. I purposely write some sloppy stuff and even cross out, and my content is very free – which are details they always notice. Then they do their own first freewrite. After that, we do it at least once a week. When we freewrite, I do it as well, and have volunteered to share my writing. I am very committed to what freewriting has contributed to the community of the classroom, maybe more than anything else. I believe that in many ways it has enhanced the other, more "official" kinds of writing that we do. (*Grace Raffaele*)

• **Finding topics:** Over the years I've collected hundreds of topics for my high school students to write about, but nothing works as well for journals as just letting them make up their own. I give out blank slips of paper at the beginning of a semester and ask my students to anonymously write topics, questions, quotes, or prompts. After I read through the pile to make sure they are all suitable (a handful of students always takes advantage of the anonymity), I put them in a box. Each day a student comes up, draws a slip out, and writes that topic on the board. Students are invited to choose that topic if they like, or write about anything else they want. (*Katherine Schulten*)



• **Story prompts:** I give my students “story prompts” once a week. These can be story openers such as, “It was a dark and stormy night...”, or lines from the middle of a story such as, “At that moment, he realized he had definitely lost it. Immediately, he panicked.” Students each choose one, and write a story or narrative generated from the prompt. The lines can be made up, or can come from literature, and the students can use them at the beginning, middle, or end of the piece. (If they are from literature, students might later compare their own work with how the author originally used them.) After the students have written for awhile, I sometimes ask them to trade stories in groups of three and continue each other’s narratives. Students then get their own stories returned before the end of the period and get to put the finishing touches on them. I am always amazed at how successful this simple activity is, and what a great way to start off the term with writing. I think it demonstrates how hungry some kids are to write something for themselves. (*Sally McMahon*)

PERSONAL AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Whether for an extended unit on memoir or just as a quick means to connect our students’ lives to the lives or situations of characters they will read about in history and literature, nearly all Writing Project teachers use personal writing – writing about oneself – as a “way in.” Here are some ideas that have worked for guiding students to write about identity:

• **Inner and outer selves:** I often do an identity piece with middle and high school students as a way to begin a class. We talk about the distinction between the face we show to the world and the one which is private. They freewrite about this, then my students create collages depicting their inner and outer selves. I use them as the backdrop for my bulletin boards. When they’re posted, there is a real sense for the students of making the room their own. (*Nancy Mintz*)

• **Identity metaphors:** I often start a middle school memoir unit by having us all make metaphors for our identities. This helps us get to know and be comfortable with each other. Students complete a chart that asks them the following: If you were to be an animal which one would it be? What characteristic of that animal is similar to you? What/How/Why/or when are you like this animal? Then they do the same for other categories such as color (What color would you be?), vehicle, natural element, plant, number (a tough one!), mineral, food and “other man-made object.” We then select those that work best for us and create poems made up of the metaphors. I found it this exercise originally in a wonderful book, *Drawing Your Own Conclusions* (1997), by Fran Claggett and Joan Brown. (*Grace Raffaele*)



• **Identity assignment:** My teaching group is beginning with a look at identity with our high school students. We're reading, freewriting, writing poetry, and doing drama about our names and who we are. Here is some of the assignment I give students:

You will be writing stories about yourself and your neighborhood. These stories will come from both past memories and from present observations. Your stories need to have a theme, teach a lesson, and represent an opinion, as well as have vivid characters, include dialogue, and use descriptive detail. Your stories need to be about how you define yourself. You need to tell stories that answer questions about your identity, such as these:

- *Who am I?*
- *What groups do I see myself as part of?* (Examples of groups include: age/gender groups, football/baseball players, sports teams, religious affiliations, socio-economic groups, racial/ethnic/cultural/country groups, occupational/job groups, hobby/interest groups, neighborhood groups.)
- *What makes me unique within each of these groups?*
- *How do my identity groups describe themselves?*
- *How do people in my identity groups see me?*
- *What do people outside of my identity groups say about people in my groups?*
- *What are the stereotypes about people like me?*
- *Is it better for me to assimilate or to maintain my separate cultural identity?*

(Paul Allison)

• **"Graffiti photos":** I do the wonderful "Where I'm From" poem from Linda Christensen's *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word* (2002) to have my students write a poem about themselves and their backgrounds. Then I have them take two photos – an image of themselves and one of something or someone important to them. We enlarge these photos into poster size. Next the students write their identity poem or a poem about the important person or thing directly onto the images. They use different media and have complete artistic freedom with the text. The result is a large graffiti-type creation with an image and text. Students use these as their portfolio pieces for my class and take a lot of pride in their work. (Suzanna McNamara)

• **Name Poems:** I often play a "name game" I got from Susan Goldsmith Wooldridge's book, *Poemcrazy* (1997). Chapter 10 in this book is called "Our Real Names" and describes the process of creating a name poem. Wooldridge talks about working with young people in a juvenile hall setting, who used some of these opening lines to create their poems:



My real name is...
Yesterday my name was...
Today my name is...
Tomorrow my name will be...
Secretly I know my name is...
My name once was...
In my dream my name was...
My friend (husband, mother, son, boss, etc.)
thinks my name is...
(Julie Conason)

• **“My name”:** I use the chapter “My Name” from Sandra Cisneros’s *House On Mango Street* in a unit on love and marriage. On the back of an application for a marriage license (which I include as a life-skills document) there is an entire paragraph about the adoption of a surname. So we go right to the chapter “My Name” in *Mango Street* and have some great discussions about culture, law, tradition, and feminism. Then students can write their own “My Name” paragraphs. I’ve always had a great response to those few perfect paragraphs. (Linda Correnti)



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ESSAYS

A perennial concern on the listserv is how to guide our students to write clear, interesting, and well-supported essays. Four teachers below write about getting the process started and assessing it along the way.

• **Determining an essay topic and creating a rubric for marking it:** Here are the step-by-step directions of what I do with my students to help them brainstorm essay topics together and create a rubric for marking them.

Brainstorming the topics:

1. Post a piece of newsprint at the front of the room, and have a marker available. As the reading and discussion of a work proceed, students can get up and write questions or observations as they occur to them. Keep those questions and observations posted around the room as you continue to study the work. It creates an ongoing dialogue that becomes increasingly valuable.
2. Divide the class into groups to come up with one statement and one question about the work under study. (You’ll be surprised with both the overlap and the variety.) Let each group defend its statement to the class and also invite the class to answer its question. I have found this to be virtually failsafe in terms of creating essay topics.

Constructing the rubric:

3. Once the topic(s) are determined by the class, have each group list the elements that would need to be included in a model answer. Have the groups post their suggestions on newsprint that can be displayed around the room. Lead the class through a review of the suggestions, particularly noting the overlaps.
4. Have the class as a whole arrange the groups' suggestions into a rubric (they work in their notebooks, then you write what they tell you at the board). Of course, at this point, you will be directing the organization and inserting any items missed by the groups.

Implementation:

5. Type and run off the final version of the rubric (adding and deleting as you see fit) and distribute it to the students to use as a guide as they construct their essays.
6. Have the students bring in drafts of their essays to share with another student who will use the rubric to make suggestions for revision. (When students participate in the construction of the rubric, they tend to become invested in it, so they're pretty responsive to each other's attempts.)
7. Finally, have the students submit the revised essays along with the rubric, which you will use to indicate your response to the essay.

(Julie Merker)

• **Creating thesis statements together:** One way my class and I have come up with thesis statements together is by beginning with some shared text we're all reading. Each student then makes up a thesis (which I define as "a position that can be argued"). Students can work to refine them in pairs or groups, defending their reasoning to each other. Finally, you can share them as a whole class. Class discussion can turn a student's first thesis of "Toby's mother seems really defeated and unable to take care of her son, even though she knows he's in trouble" (from *This Boy's Life*) into "A parent's inaction can lead a child to take control of his own situation." Do a few of these together from a common text, and, believe me, they will learn.

(Georgia Christgau)

• **Graphic organizers to structure essays:** For many writers, one of the hardest steps in crafting an essay is taking one's first, tentative writing on a topic and organizing it into something more structured. Some of the teachers with whom I work at Bronx International have found it helpful at this stage to design graphic organizers that help their students "map out" what they want to say in response to a particular question or topic. These organizers use a combination of graphics and sentence starters to prompt students to structure necessary information. For instance, an organizer for a persuasive essay might have four empty boxes. The first box might



have sentence starters like, “What I want to write about is...” and “My position on this controversial issue is...” Students can fill in these sentence starters to begin to craft a thesis statement. The next two boxes can help guide the body paragraphs by containing sentence starters like, “One piece of evidence I have to support my position is...” and “This evidence supports my position because...” The final box can be used for students to reflect on or draw a conclusion about the information as a whole. A sentence starter for this box might read, “One conclusion I can draw from this information is...” The key is that the teacher must design the organizer so that it asks for the information that is necessary to the task. A literature teacher’s graphic organizer for students writing a practice ELA Regents task IV essay, for instance, might include an empty box with a sentence starter that asks students to interpret the critical lens in their own words.

As students become more experienced with using teacher-made graphic organizers, they can begin to create their own organizers as an alternative or companion to the more traditional outline. They can also share these organizers in pairs or small groups as a precursor to beginning a formal draft of an essay. Teachers I know who work with ELL students have found that graphic organizers can be particularly helpful in essay writing, because they provide a transition for students into a form that might be culturally unfamiliar to them.

Some teachers also add another useful step by having students share some aspect of their graphic organizer with the whole class. To do this, you might have students write out their thesis statements (or critical lens interpretation or conclusion – whatever it is you would like to teach) on sentence strips. Students then hang these on the wall so that the whole class can see the range of possibilities and discuss which are strongest.

Although students will still need help to move from the very structured writing of a graphic organizer to the more natural and smooth writing of a final essay, we have found that graphic organizers can help students understand what is essential to include in an essay and how to structure that information clearly. One last point: We have found it important not to make the design of these graphic organizers overly complicated or they can constrict the flow of the writing.

(Ed Osterman)

• **College admissions essay:** I help students in the college office write their personal essays, and my feeling is that they are at their best when they are writing about their deeply personal side. They’ve traveled a rough road, most of them, and they often want someone to know that, whether the person is an admissions panelist or not. I always encourage students to allow the college to see a side of them that the application could never reveal and that someone looking at a snapshot could never know. The stories that pour out have



been treasured in binders. I have them begin with a freewrite on the prompt, “Take me to a time and place where you were involved with someone in some way, or in an environment of some kind, or going through an experience that at this moment you are sure you will never forget. Be concerned about nothing in your writing except allowing me to know what the experience was like.”

The kids spend from two hours to two days getting something down that invariably is returned on sometimes eight sheets of longhand. They become lost in the event. Topics such as “Leaving Grant” or “Living in Franklin,” about life in drug-infested New York City housing projects, don’t exactly leap to mind as standard admissions essay fodder, nor does discovering that an older sister is actually a parent. One student wrote about spending the previous summer travelling the South with her uncle’s small circus and learning about discrimination for the first time. Even colleges that reject these students often include a note complimenting them on their essays. (*Dusty Miller*)

WRITING POETRY

Though most of us who work with poetry in our classrooms are English teachers, one of the entries below describes how poetry can be used across the curriculum to help students look more closely at any densely written text.

- **Found poetry:** To help students make meaning of a text with rich language, but do so in a fun and creative way, try using “found poetry.” First ask students to read whatever text you are working with (fiction, an historical document, a newspaper article, or almost anything else). They should read with a pen in hand, underlining any words, phrases, or whole lines they find particularly important, disturbing, funny, moving, or interesting for any reason. Tell them they will be creating a kind of poem from these bits of language they have underlined. They needn’t worry about rhyme; their goal is to use the language of the text to reflect their own thinking about the content. Their finished poem should capture one or two key ideas or aspects of the reading.

To do this, have students take these lines, words, and phrases and rearrange them in some new way on a new page so that they bring out a particular idea, or highlight something important about the original text. They can repeat words, break lines up on the page to isolate particular words or lines, put words together that wouldn’t ordinarily go together, give their creation a title, or play with what they’ve collected in any way they like. (They should not add their own words to the mix, although some teachers have students do this on a second round.) Have them read these new “found poems” aloud, in partners, or to the whole class. You can also publish these



“found poems” alongside the original text. Students are often quite proud of what they have created, and the whole class benefits from seeing and hearing the original text again in a new way.

(Ed Osterman and Eliza Fabillar, American Social History Project)

- **List poems:** This idea came from Kenneth Koch (*Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, 1980) and Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Even with younger students I have had success with it. Have students begin writing “list poems” using “I remember...” as the first line of every sentence. After kids do lists of “I remembers,” they see they can write a full page for homework! Next we write and talk about the prompts “I used to be... but now I am...” as another list. Both generate a lot of talk. *(Grace Raffaele)*

- **Concrete poetry:** I have students make “concrete poems,” or poetry that is in the shape of its subject, and it proves liberating to students every time. My favorite model to show is in French (“Il Pleut” by Guillaume Apollinaire), but I display it anyway as everyone can see it’s about rain: the words “rain” down the page. *(Margaret Fiore)*

- **Write from a title:** One of the teachers I’ve worked with at Evander has an interesting way to generate poetry writing. He provides a topic (love, teachers, back-stabbing etc.) and asks each student to come up with three interesting/provocative titles for a poem on that topic. The first time he does this he’ll give some examples (for love: My Darling, My Hamburger, Dumb Love, etc.) They write their title ideas on index cards; when they are read aloud the students can pick any one they like and write a poem about it. You might just choose two each day or something like that and let them have a go at writing in any form they wish. *(Joe Bellacero)*

- **List poems about school:** One way I have had students learn to generate striking images is to get them together in small groups to write about a shared experience – school. With high school students, I ask them to choose either junior high or elementary school and to brainstorm together a number of memories, all beginning “I remember.” We do an example or two on the board first, and talk about how the sentence, “We remember first grade”, doesn’t say nearly as much as, say, “I remember my first grade teacher’s dangly bead earrings and the clacking noise they made when she bent over my seat.” Students then work in groups to pool their best memories, and write them up on big paper. (Each sentence begins with “I” but the “I” is anonymous – just one of the members of the group.) If there’s time, they can even use the margins to illustrate one or two. Each group then takes turns reading these aloud, and students always begin to notice how universal our school experiences are, regardless of where and when they took place. *(Katherine Schulten)*



WRITING FOR A REAL AUDIENCE

It's always wonderful when student writing has a real audience beyond the classroom. As the teachers below found, it's also usually well worth the effort. Whether writing letters to someone who was an eye-witness to history or collecting independent reading recommendations to post school-wide, almost any unit can include writing that finds an audience outside the immediate classroom. Here are some ways we have done it:

- **Profiles of a friend:** My journalism class was thoroughly intimidated by the prospect of interviewing and having their work made public in the school newspaper. In order to get them around the fear of interviewing, we started studying journalistic profiles, and students tried writing their own. As they were reading them aloud, one of the pieces reminded me of my friend, Debi, whom I've known since seventh grade. When I told the class about her, they insisted that I write a profile of her. I did, they gave me feedback, and I revised it – and then mentioned that I was going to e-mail it to her. I asked that they help me write a cover letter first. I never saw them get busy with a writing task so fast! Debi responded quickly with a note to the whole group, and they were thrilled. I then suggested that we send her all of the profiles. This became a great inspiration to revise and polish, and, much to the students' delight, she wrote each one of them a personal note in return. (*Gina Moss*)

- **Pen pals in Japan:** When I was teaching ninth grade humanities, my materials for Japan were very sketchy, so my students became pen pals with a class in Japan. Aside from the "you've got mail" thrill, the letters were amazing artifacts for comparing cultures – everything from the letters themselves which showed the Japanese students' handwriting and spelling in English, to the various souvenirs that students inevitably exchanged in the letters, which we would analyze for how they reflected the two cultures and their values. (*Julie Merker*)

- **Letters to the troops:** Another poignant experience with letter writing was when my class sent letters to troops during the first Gulf War. For years after, tiny yellow ribbons with the names of troops who responded to individual students waved from the gate that covered the classroom window, until people wondered what in the world they were. Needless to say, our study of the Middle East had a resonance from reading the individual soldiers' reactions to their surroundings that couldn't be matched by facts and statistics in the texts. (*Julie Merker*)

- **Letters to Dith Pran:** When my students were reading *The Death and Life of Dith Pran*, there was a movement to bring the remaining elements of the Khmer Rouge before the World Court. We read and discussed some of the articles about that movement.



The letter-writing assignment gave the students the choice of writing to the World Court, expressing an opinion about the effort to charge accused war criminals from Cambodia, or to Dith Pran. Those who wrote to Dith Pran received both hand-written letters and e-mail for years, giving an incredible insight into the man and into the movement which he was passionately backing. Perhaps it was the bond forged by writing the point-of-view* journals, but students in the class broke down and cried upon receiving his response. There isn't anything that can equal having your students study a topic from history with a personal letter in their hands from someone who was an eyewitness to the event. *(Julie Merker)*

• **Independent reading recommendations:** At the end of the first year of a new New York City literacy curriculum, one that builds independent reading into each ninth-grade English class, the librarian at Jane Addams High School, Dana Lehrman, and I wanted to celebrate the huge amount of reading many of these students had done as a result. We decided to collect and publish one "best pick" book recommendation from every ninth grader. To do this, we gave out notecards and had them write down the title, author, and their own name, then one sentence telling what the book was about and one sentence telling why they liked it. We typed these into a categorized list, consciously keeping the kids' own words (because they say such wonderful things as "Your eyeballs won't let you stop reading this book!"). Next year we'll use these in a few "real world" ways:

1. To give to teachers to keep in their classrooms so that next year, when a student complains there's "nothing to read," they can peruse this "kid-to-kid" list for suggestions.
2. As part of a bulletin board in the library over a shelf of the 50-odd recommended books. (We're also hoping to get student illustrations, and to have a little quiz on the board with provocative questions like "Which book is about a boy faking his own death?")
3. Next year, on that weekly calendar schools give out to faculty, each week the librarian will take one or two of the book recommendations and publish them, with the students' names and in their own words, to remind teachers and students that these books are available in the library.

(Katherine Schulten)

REVISING WRITING

A key component of the writing process is revising, but for many young writers, this is a difficult stage. Writing Project teachers constantly experiment with ways to encourage more work on a first draft. Some of us read and comment on students' first drafts to help support them in making revisions, while others ask that students turn to their peers



for a first response to an early draft. One of the most common ways to elicit peer response is to have students meet in writing groups and share drafts. In these groups we sometimes give the responders specific roles or response sheets to guide the process, while other times we allow open-ended discussion. Here are some ways we've worked with revising and with encouraging peer response to writing.

- **New writing on an old draft:** "Always ask for new writing on the day a draft is due." I first heard this from ILS Director Marcie Wolfe when I asked her, "How can you get writers to be willing to revise?" I think it is an invaluable guiding principle for the teacher of any age group who wants to encourage and support revision. I have observed in my students a reluctance to try out alternatives, or even do much close looking at first drafts, especially when the writer is most "invested." So, on the day a draft is due, and before sending students into groups to read, I like to suggest that students put aside the draft they came in with and take out a new sheet of paper. Now you can ask them for other kinds of writing – writing that "tries out" (not changes) voice, form, audience, time, or even the moral of the story. Ask them, "If your draft could talk, what would it say?" Ask, "If it could go on vacation, where would it go?" (These I borrowed from teacher-consultant Nick D'Alessandro.) Ask all kinds of questions. I would then suggest students might share with their groups this piece or the draft they brought in or both – whatever part of any of the writing they'd like to read. (Although the teacher can require that everyone must share something, that "something" can be quite open, and even include process writing.) I think the language we use has a lot to do with how successful we are at encouraging and supporting revision. Incidentally, for the students who may not have done any writing beforehand, this "new writing" can be what they bring to group. (*Thomasina LaGuardia*)

- **What you did right:** In responding to the first essay my special education students write, I take a different approach than usual. Instead of noting what they did wrong, I give each of them a detailed list of what skills they have mastered in this piece of writing. They get a lot of confidence from it, and their second essays are longer and more detailed. In the second essay I assign, I ask them to evaluate their own strengths using my responses on the previous piece as a guide. (*Steven Strauss*)

- **Small group feedback:** When I put high school students into groups to respond to each other's work, I find they do better when they are given very specific questions to guide their feedback. Simple ones work best: *What confused you? What did you want to hear more about? What was the overall feeling or message you got from the piece?* But it's also worth remembering that giving feedback is just a very, very hard task for students to do. I think it's worth stressing the second part of the process – what the writer does with the feedback.



I emphasize that the writer is free to disregard suggestions, but that they should be aware of their reasons for doing this. Depending on time, maybe writers could benefit from writing about how they processed and dealt with the feedback. Besides having the teacher model her own revision, what about doing a group-feedback exercise using an overhead? When I do this, I use real student work from a different class. This way, people can say what they want, and we can talk about how to put the same idea more constructively if we need to. (*Sharon Russo*)

• **“Talking” a paper:** Once I had a student who was completely blocked when he wrote, but great at “talking” his papers. We ended up letting him talk many of his first drafts in class. (This was a pleasure because he was so good, and because he then wrote them down later.) A few years later I had a group of college freshman English students who were particularly articulate in class discussion, and far less fluent in writing. I remembered the other student and invited those who wanted to compose drafts aloud to try exactly that in small groups (so there was an audience). “Composing aloud” meant creating and changing sentences, phrases, even restarting. Each composer then quickly wrote a very rough draft to work on at home. That rough draft was submitted the following week to an oral revision process in group again. All of the students – even those who didn’t “need” to compose aloud – learned that reading or “speaking” a piece aloud can really help at every point along the way.

Speaking drafts aloud helps everyone. I also always read students’ papers and stories aloud to the class. I read them dramatically, correct surface errors as I read, and read only effective papers. Students sometimes say of their own work, “You made the paper sound a lot better than it was.” Then they write even more effectively next time around. Their writing begins to take on a life of its own. I began doing this because students rarely do justice to their own work when they read aloud, and because I can read “anonymously” with the writer having the option of identifying him or herself. (*Susan Sermoneta*)

• **Sticky-note responses:** When my students have an “author’s celebration” or “read-around,” sometimes everyone reads a piece of work aloud or they read silently and pass the piece on to the next person after they have read it. I put out several baskets of sticky notes and kids are invited to write a short note to any author they would like to respond to. Of course, to get ready for this, we have spent time talking about what kinds of responses are helpful and appropriate. (*Laura Schwartzberg*)

• **Letters to published student writers:** Whenever my classes read student publications – newspapers, literary magazines, etc. –



I ask them toward the end of the period to write to one of the authors, giving any kind of feedback that they like. Then I collect the letters and distribute them to the authors' English teachers or to the publication's advisor. You can't imagine how touched the authors are to get this feedback (as opposed to seeing copies of their work strewn around the school, which unfortunately would happen). I think it's important that we do as much as possible to support student authors and the teachers who expend so much effort to validate student work through publication. (*Julie Merker*)

ASSESSING STUDENT WORK

As teacher-consultant Julie Merker once wrote on the listserv, "Sadly, the paper load is the issue for English teachers working in the public school system. Your 'load' in high school is $5 \times 34 = 170$. So, case closed: Superwoman couldn't handle that caseload. You are being asked to do the impossible." Many of us have come up with creative ways to give students the feedback they need without "doing the impossible." For some of us, rubrics have helped. For others, the solution has been to involve students in aspects of teaching that were traditionally done solely by the teacher.

- **Students write questions for the test:** Rather than writing a final exam myself, I sometimes spend a few days with the students having them write the questions. Then, as a "study time," they administer their questions to a partner. Then partners go over the questions and answers and pick four between the two of them to submit to me for the whole-class final. Of course, there are many duplicate questions. But this leads to great discussions about types of questions and answers and what is most important to take away with us from the learning or reading. And I have the test written for me! I feel the learning that goes on during the making of the "test" is far more important than the test itself. (*Grace Raffaele*)

- **Grading with a rubric:** I do mark papers. But I don't mark them all. I only mark and comment on final drafts. And whenever I receive a final draft, or when I've collected mid-term or final essays, I use rubrics to grade them. I attach the appropriate rubric to the essay and mark the essay by circling the section which best describes what the writer has done in relation to meaning, development, organization, language and conventions. I assign each column a point value (if 25 points are the total, then column one = 0, two = 1, three = 2, four = 3, five = 4, six = 5) and am able to quickly add up the points and assign a grade. Post-marking conferences with students now have a clear focus, as we have specifics to discuss. When the students question what I've circled, I can refine my own understanding of what the rubric calls for by explaining it to the student. It confirms it in my own mind. Or when I find I have truly strayed from the rubric



statement, I can apologize to the student and add another bit of understanding to my own marking. I have become much more consistent as the year has progressed, which allays one of my big fears about marking the Regents – that I will have over- or under-marked a student's work. The students have also begun to internalize differences between the various columns. It is thrilling to see them move up a notch (and not uncommonly, more than one notch) as the light dawns and they understand what is required. (*Joe Bellacero*)

• **Formulating the grade with your students:** I also use rubrics. I ask, what elements are needed in this essay? What kind of checklist can we develop to determine whether these elements have been incorporated, and to what extent? These are the basic questions for formulating a rubric, and they can be applied to grading as well.

At the beginning of each marking period (whatever length and frequency that might entail), I formulate with the students what work will be required and how it will be weighted. If, for example, a research project is part of the marking period's work, it might be assigned a weight, e.g., 40 points, and then a rubric will be constructed based on a maximum of 40 for that project. Individual homework assignments might be weighted at one point each, etc. Whatever the combination, students have a sheet in their notebooks where the points can be tallied throughout the marking period. No surprises, no arguments, just an accumulation of points that determine the grade. It removes the mystery, makes the students responsible for their own fate, and makes determining the grade simple. (*Julie Merker*)

• **Error correction system:** When I was teaching my intermediate ESL writing classes, I used an error correction system developed by Paul Camhi at Borough of Manhattan Community College. He had great success using it within the writing process approach in helping students pass the CUNY Writing Assessment Test. I adapted it and use it regularly for every writing unit that culminates in a graded final draft. After peer editing, teacher comments, and, hopefully, some significant revision, students hand in their papers to me. I take them home and add the error correction symbols (for example "sp" for spelling). Students practice with these symbols and the writing convention rules that they are based on during the days that they are waiting for me to bring back the drafts. The day I return them, students are instructed to use the entire class time, correcting their work and asking peers and me for help if necessary. They are not allowed to begin rewriting the final draft since that distracts them from the task. I find this method very useful and effective for raising student consciousness of grammar and conventions. Their writing really does improve over time and the kids really like it.

(*Jane Berkowicz*)



• **Admit and exit slips:** One idea that I have found particularly helpful comes from *Roots in the Sawdust* (1985) by Anne Ruggles Gere: using “admit” slips and “exit” slips. The purpose of these are to provide a way for students to participate individually in each day’s lesson. I keep a large envelope taped to the wall, and as students come in they can deposit their contribution. It can be a vocabulary word from the reading, an article in the newspaper that dealt with an idea from the reading, a running cartoon of the plot, or the “secretary’s summary” (one person is responsible each day for summarizing the lesson from the day before). One student is responsible each day for separating the contents of the envelope. We always begin with the secretary’s summary, and the absentees have a chance to ask questions. This whole review takes no more than seven minutes and each student who contributes receives credit. Exit slips are small pieces of paper on which students write responses to open-ended statements like, “Today I learned...,” “One question I had...,” etc. This all provides instant feedback to help in future lesson planning. (*Helen Ogden*)

• **Homework:** Homework in my class is always a writing assignment. It’s sort of, but not quite, the writer’s notebook method of collecting writing and eventually finding seeds for more developed work. The assignments are numbered and I keep a running list in the room on chart paper. Students must write every night there is school – absent or not, specific assignment or not. Oftentimes the assignments are specific – responding to classroom work, readings, topics related to what we are doing, etc. Other times – and if a student is absent, this is their assignment – they have “Writer’s Choice,” meaning they can write about anything they want or select a topic from a bookmark that I made up with writing prompts on it. All of this is done in a separate notebook or composition book. I check daily by going around the room to see if they have done the work. I don’t (can’t!) read any at that time. Depending on the assignment we may be sharing these in class that day or using the homework to prompt or extend discussions. Before the end of a marking period, I collect the notebooks and literally count the pages for a numerical grade. I also ask students to put a sticky note on one or two pages that they think I would enjoy reading or that show good writing or thinking. I only read and comment on those one or two per student. I also try to stagger when I collect the notebooks depending on how many classes and students I have.

Sometimes I even let students create the assignment for the night. At the end of a period, I might ask, “What should we write for homework?” and we make a list of two or three possibilities. I also devote a day near the end of the marking period to catching up on assignments in class. Students are checked daily for their homework, but in the end we evaluate their notebooks as a whole. If you’ve messed up on keeping up with homework, you can still catch up and do well on your overall notebook evaluation. (*Grace Raffaele*)



READING (AND USING WRITING TO SUPPORT IT)

LEARNING LOGS AND DOUBLE-ENTRY NOTES

Learning logs are tools for “writing to learn” with specific content and are generally more focused than journals. They help students to engage actively but personally with subject matter and make meaning of the content through the freedom of this informal kind of writing. For example, students might keep literature logs as they read a novel, noting their reactions, predictions, observations, and questions as they come up. Double-entry notes* are a variation on learning logs. They are logs in which the page is divided in half to serve two functions: on one side, to record information, and on the other side, to note one’s reactions, thought processes, and questions about that information. Logs of both kinds can be used while studying any kind of content, whether a novel, film, scientific data, textbook chapter, or primary source historical document. Here are some ways we’ve used and adapted them:



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- **Logs for small-group study of a novel:** To go along with their reading of *A Tale of Two Cities*, my sophomores are organized into self-chosen groups. Each group has an assigned theme from the novel – very general themes such as “hardship,” “decadence,” “morality/values,” and “leadership.” Each student then keeps an individual log of parts of the book that match their theme. As a group they will discuss the theme and present something to the class. Each week, I collect two logs and they go into a folder. I skim them and speak to students who need guidance or a nudge. These logs are meant as a reading aid, but I have three goals for them: to give students a way into the novel; as a group activity to help them explore their ideas in a social, talky way; and to be used as notes toward a later final essay. *(Sharon Russo)*

- **Modeling responses:** With elementary school children, I use double-entry journals mostly for observation of real objects like snails, leaves, or historical artifacts such as Native American tools, but also for a reading support when we pursue a theme in science or social studies. I think that some children may need more explicit models of thinking aloud and more experience responding before they can do double-entry. To give them this, we often use a “shared text” on an overhead projector that everyone can read and dissect together. I recently used a think-aloud with a class to model my own thinking about a non-fiction text. Young children and non-fluent older readers need to see how we struggle with a text and what we do to make the meaning clear. I stop and note things that I am reminded of, questions that I have, or how I re-read to make sure that I understand. *(Laura Schwartzberg)*

• **Double-entry notes for research:** I have used double entry several times this year with younger students. They love it. It graphically demonstrates to them the difference between reading for pleasure with fiction, and reading for information with fact. I make two columns, “What do I want to remember?” and “What am I wondering about?” They have learned to write their reports in their own words by re-reading the “What do I want to remember?” part and then turning their papers over and writing from it. The “What am I wondering about?” part has led my students down different roads of discovery, using the Internet, encyclopedias, and other texts. Double entry has made research fun for my class. *(Barbara Simon)*

• **Peer response to logs:** I think logs of any kind are most powerful when there is some form of ongoing response. You might ask students to trade some entries with one another and respond to each other. The value of this would be that they could engage in a periodic dialogue with one another in print, they would learn how to respond to each other’s ideas, and they would be getting responses from sources other than just you. For double-entry logs especially, I think there needs to be lots of time allotted for sharing, lots of time to practice doing it in class, but also time for a follow-up with whole class discussion. The teacher needs to pull it all together, too. When the quotes and responses are shared, the author’s lines and ideas are re-read and the reader’s responses re-thought. In that way pieces of text are reviewed. Many teachers have noticed the benefits of using this kind of writing while reading: it slows readers down, makes them engage more deeply with an author’s language, and is particularly helpful for making sense of challenging texts. *(Ed Osterman)*

• **From double entry to drawing images:** I often begin the reading of a difficult text with my high school classes with double-entry notes, having students record quotes from the text in the left column and add personal responses in the right. I model on the board the way to do this, and I frequently suggest what should be written in the left-hand column. Students share their notebooks and talk frequently about how they are responding. Early on, after they have read a very small portion of the text, I bring in newsprint and markers and crayons and invite them to draw images they think they can “see” from reading, then locate lines from the text that can serve as captions. I quickly mount these drawings with captions on a classroom bulletin board, and suggest that in continuing the double-entry note-taking the students might want to continue drawing in a smaller scale, a sketch inside a column or across two columns. They usually respond readily and happily and their notebooks are beautiful. *(Thomasina LaGuardia)*

• **Triple-entry notes with difficult texts:** One reason I use triple entry (my three columns are quotation, paraphrase, and analysis/reaction) with difficult texts is because it gets my students to read more



closely. If students share those journals, they see what the other students thought were the important lines, and what I thought were the important lines. And suddenly lots of lines are looked at closely. Triple entry is my preferred mode because it gives that crucial “translation” column (paraphrase) so needed for tough texts. It’s not necessary for something more reader-friendly. They do need to practice and learn to paraphrase (column two of my three). It is not easy; the instinct is to jump to analysis, or to say things in the paraphrase which are not in the original. But I like the fact that they’re reading the text in a way that sometimes students doing a regular log are not necessarily forced to do. (Kate Moss)

• **Sample literature log prompts:** Here are some of the instructions I have given my students for response when they are reading *Novel Without a Name* by Duong Thu Huong. Students complete these prompts for each of the five sections in the novel. The most important parts of the instructions are the freewrites and the free-drawings. This kind of reading log gives students an opportunity to connect personally to their reading, and for me to see what they are thinking. Many students also draw in ways that helped them think about and respond to what they read.

1. Read each section, then review that section quickly, looking for a phrase from the author’s own words that sums up that section. Write that phrase as if it were a title for that section. When you finish a longer section, use the author’s words to make up a title that summarizes that whole part of the book.
2. Major Characters. For each of the characters, list three words to describe what he/she is like or is doing in these sections.
3. Free-writing Response to Part One. After you finish reading, choose one of the following sentence starters and write non-stop for 10 minutes or until you get to the bottom of the page (whichever comes first). After copying one of the following sentences on the top line, write anything that comes into your head without paying attention to grammar or spelling. Try to keep up with what is in your mind while you are writing. Add more paper if you need.

Sentence Starters:

- a. I hope that [this character] does/doesn’t...
- b. This reminds me of something that happened to me.
One time...
- c. I got tired of reading this on page ____, because...
- d. I liked/didn’t like this section, because...
- e. What I noticed most of all in this section was...
- f. A good example of “working together” in this novel is when...
- g. The conflict between ____ and ____ seems real to me because...
- h. What makes the Vietnamese way of thinking so different is...



- i. Free-drawing Response to Part One. After you finish reading, draw a response to this section of the novel. It is not necessary to be able to draw well. Instead, just let your pen or pencil go! Start at some point on this page, then draw whatever comes to mind as you think back on this section of the novel.

(Paul Allison)

CONFRONTING DIFFICULT TEXTS

Although the definition of a “difficult text” depends on your students, there are some texts, or genres of texts, that seem universally challenging. In the entries below, teachers suggest ways to help students break down standardized tests, look closely at the language of historical documents, or work collaboratively to discover important ideas in a novel. Most of these ideas are grounded in the theory of reader-response and ask students to try to make meaning of even very challenging texts. As teacher Mary Carroll once wrote on the listserv, “I tell my students that the author only writes half of the story – the rest gets written in our imaginations, through our experiences and understanding. If the students are not asking their own questions, but instead leafing through books looking for the answers to our questions, then they will not learn that their view of the reading is legitimate.”

• **Supports for reading standardized tests:** One way all teachers may be more successful in helping readers negotiate the directions and reading passages of standardized tests is to think of themselves as reading teachers. Many of our students need support to organize information and time to process it through application. Here are a few strategies that may help:

1. Have students do multiple readings of the text. In the first reading they can underline and share with the class what they understand. In the second reading they can circle what they don’t understand. Then, in small groups they can discuss the passage, thereby helping one another understand more. Finally, students list for the teacher what they still don’t understand for further work.
2. Students can use graphic organizers. One helpful book is published by Globe Fearon in a series called *Reading in the Content Areas: Strategies for Reading Success* (1998). It comes in a variety of levels and a variety of subject areas. The graphic organizers used essentially repeat steps such as KWL, recording main points and evidence/details, predicting, sequencing, taking notes, and reviewing or summarizing. These take time, but, with cooperative work and sharing, students will get better.
3. Students can draw pictures that show what they understand



about a text and explain their pictures.

4. Students can be asked to explain the directions to each other and/or write a paraphrase of the text in small groups.
5. Finally, don't forget to allow ELL students to use their native languages. If they are newly arrived immigrants they may have conceptual understanding and may benefit from creating a bilingual dictionary.

Doing any of these only once will achieve little gain. Struggling readers need a great deal of routine and repetition to process and absorb the new vocabulary and meaning. (*Jane Berkowicz*)

• **Developing a “list of issues”:** When working with a particularly dense text, I ask students first to write about it from prompts. Then I often have students cluster in small groups to develop a list of larger issues and assertions emerging from the text. Groups can then share these with the whole class. These issues can lead to an essay or other extended piece of writing, all the more relevant to the students because they, not the teacher, “own” the controlling ideas. (*Diane Giorgi*)

• **Categorizing comments:** When we read a common text that is difficult, I give kids a specific purpose, such as looking at character, and have them jot down their thinking about that purpose on sticky notes. When the kids share their comments aloud, we write them up on sentence strips and then categorize them so that they have a chart of different kinds of responses. Examining what we do when we read and making it public is really powerful. It reinforces the idea that reading is an active process and that there are a variety of ways that we can respond to what we read. (*Laura Schwartzberg*)

• **Statements and questions:** Whenever I teach Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, students struggle and complain that the text is incomprehensible. So once the students start to voice dismay and confusion, I assign them to do two things for homework: write a statement you think is true of the story, and pose a question you have about the story. In the next lesson, I have them work in groups of four to preview each other's statements and questions, and to decide on one of each to present to the class. The question is one they want the class to help them to answer, and the statement is one that they feel they could defend if challenged by the class. Initially, I give this assignment to help me understand what they feel they know and what they still need to know. As it turns out, when the groups present to the whole class, several lessons are spent with groups questioning, stating, and challenging each other – and in the process virtually every important point in the story is addressed. There are many “aha's” and revisions of original positions. I also think this would work with any piece that is particularly challenging to the students. (*Julie Merker*)



• ***Id, Ego, and Superego rob a bank:*** In a study of identity, I have my college class read a chapter from *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* by Calvin Hall. Students find the text impenetrable: dense, discouraging, and boring. Instead of just choosing the “quick fix” and lecturing them on the content – what the id, the ego, and the superego are – I have tried something that pushes the information off the page and into the students’ laps. I break the class into three groups of five and assign each group one of the personality concepts (id, ego, or superego). They have to read the text to understand their concept, be able to describe it clearly to the class, and, finally, create a scene in which a character displays that personality facet. They rehearse and present this scene to the class. This has led to skits like “The Bank Job” in which Id, Ego, and Superego are three buddies who decide to rob a bank, the Id just out for the money, the Ego (the brains of the outfit) planning the heist, and the Superego (the conscience) going along despite his better judgment. My students understand the content and get excited about it, and their perceptions change. (*Richard Ploetz*)

• ***“ABC summaries”:*** The “ABC summary” is an easy-to-use and fun tool for summarizing intimidating texts or topics. Put students in groups, ideally with a big pad and small markers, and tell them to summarize something you’ve read or studied as a class. The first sentence must start with A, the second with B, etc. They get very engaged, and they tend to use unusual vocabulary and syntax to complete the task. You get words like ‘zounds’ and sentences like “Miserable, Jane returned to Thornfield.” (*Laurie Harriton*)

• ***Deconstructing the Pledge of Allegiance:*** Before 9/11, we were starting an exploration of identity with my eighth graders. One story we planned to read was “The Boy Without a Flag,” by Abraham Rodriguez, Jr. It is about the son of a Puerto Rican immigrant who refuses to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. After 9/11, I was having qualms about reading the story without some serious preparation. I was worried that the kids would rush to agree that “conscientious objection” was warranted without equally “conscientious consideration.” Also, in our staff meetings, we had been having careful discussions about what to do to show some school-wide recognition of the events and how to show some sort of support, albeit symbolic, for this country. Most teachers agreed that just reciting the Pledge of Allegiance wasn’t what we had in mind. What I did was create a series of writing activities using the Pledge of Allegiance. It was all laid out in a series of activity sheets that had the kids do the following:

1. In a double-entry format, I wrote the words to the Pledge down the left side of a page, mostly in phrases and, in some cases, single words alone on a line (allegiance, indivisible). They were to use the right side of the page to paraphrase each word or phrase. I had a few thesauri scattered around the room for some to use. This was an individual activity.





2. They picked out key words that they thought were important to the meaning of the Pledge and key words that they felt were a problem.
3. There was a brief history of how and when the Pledge was written and twice revised which they read before going on to...
4. Answer the question, "Do you think school children should be required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance? Why or why not?"
5. They were asked to think about the opposite view to their own and explain why someone might disagree with them, somewhat like a debater might do in preparation for a debate.
6. They shared these views with a partner.
7. Now, they were asked to imagine that they are part of a new Congress that is rewriting the Pledge. Their goal is to write one that most U.S. citizens would feel comfortable reciting and that would survive over time (without mention of specific historical or political views). The process was as follows:
 - a. What is the purpose of the pledge?
 - b. What are 3 important points or concepts or key words that you want included?
 - c. Write the first draft.
 - d. Read it to someone else and get one suggestion written down.
 - e. Rewrite your pledge (homework).
8. Over the next few days, they came in with their pledges and were put into groups. In their groups they were to:
 - a. Write the purpose of your group pledge.
 - b. Write a pledge together, that incorporates something from everyone in the group.
 - c. List three times or occasions at which you all think the new pledge should be recited.
 - d. Write a letter to our principal explaining what you've done, why, and how you would like it used in the school.

The activity went extremely well. To hear the kids argue about the meanings and connotations of some of the words rather than "pledge bash" or yell at each other for being or not being patriotic was a refreshing shift in the tone of the class. (*Grace Raffaele*)

SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING READERS

Though nearly all of the other ideas in this booklet can be scaffolded to work for populations of struggling or reluctant readers and writers (such as ELL or special education students), occasionally on the listserv teachers discuss certain specific supports they have created for these groups. Here are some ideas.

- **Telling our own stories:** My low-to-intermediate ELL students and I have had great success with Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*. We go through it one or two chapters at a time, and I make

copies for them. I read aloud a chapter several times since they're so tiny. We spend as long as necessary on vocabulary, metaphors, and basic plot. We examine the structure of the chapter (what it includes and how it's organized). Then one or two volunteers very briefly tell their own stories that the chapter brings to mind. (For example, they tell about a house they lived in, or about the hair in their family, or about their names, or about the relationship between siblings.) Then everyone sits with a partner and tells their story in full (and do I mean "in full"!) while the partner asks lots of questions for clarification. I'm busy writing vocabulary on the board as they request it – they need lots of terms. The energy level is amazing. I find that they naturally draw little illustrations and act out concepts to get their ideas across. Virtually everyone is 100% engaged. For homework they write up their own stories to bring in the following week. At the end, we create a class book of these stories. *(Susan Sermoneta)*

• **Tape recording ELLs:** My colleague Benita Daniels has her speech and writing students who are new English language learners write memoirs. After they are finished, she has them read their pieces aloud to the class and she tape records them. She then gives each student a tape recording so they can have a personal record of how they sound speaking English at that particular point in their lives. *(Ed Osterman)*

• **Grid for responding:** My colleague Suzanna McNamara does lovely work with students who have a combination of literacy problems in their first language with variable English skills or students with no literacy in their first language but who have communicative English oral skills. Aside from a multitude of oral, written, and visual activities, she works with them on a unit on "beliefs and images." On one day, students look at an image/photograph/painting and respond to what they see through the lens of a grid. The grid consists of four squares for response:

1. Observation: What I see.
2. Questions: What I wonder.
3. Purpose: What is the artist saying?
4. Reactions: What does the image make me think about?
What does it make me feel?

Students respond on their own grids individually first and then Suzanna makes up a class/group one. She selects images that will generate a lot of ideas and language and provides room for students to use inference. On day two, she does the same thing with written text. *(Ed Osterman)*



VOCABULARY

Writing Project teachers believe in teaching vocabulary in context and in having “print rich” classrooms that support vocabulary acquisition in natural and multi-faceted ways. Many of us also play games or use art to reinforce our students’ understanding of new words. Here are some of the things we do.

- **Word mobiles:** At the beginning of each term, my co-teacher and I give the kids a list of 25 words that will appear in their reading. Each student is assigned the job of creating an illustration for one of the words. We hang these 25 as mobiles from the ceiling. They get points for finding the words in what they’re reading, what they hear, in advertisements, wherever. I love it, the kids love it, and they start to pay attention not just to these words, but to words in general. *(Sue Case)*

- **Print-rich environment:** When teaching a new novel to seventh- and eighth-grade students, my colleagues and I make vocabulary grids for each chapter. We select words that we feel would be unfamiliar to students and leave some blank spaces for them to add other words that are unfamiliar to them. In the first column, we have the “new” words. In the second column, there is a space for a definition. The third column is for a brief sentence, and the fourth column is for synonyms and/or antonyms. Students work on the vocabulary grids in groups, and I encourage them to try to use some of the new words in their own writing, if it seems appropriate. It certainly supports their reading of the book. I also think that creating a print-rich environment in the classroom is useful for my middle-schoolers. With the advent of computers, we post essential questions, pertinent quotations, poetry fragments and student work all around the room, all written in large type-face. Kids spend a lot of time “reading the walls.” We have magnetic poetry sets on the metal lockers, and I tape poetry and quotations to tables and work centers all around the room. Students ask what certain words mean because they want to know. They accumulate definitions of new words in the back of their writers’ notebooks. *(Julie Conason)*

- **As many words as possible:** An interesting method of teaching vocabulary that I have tried is to have students choose words (that I assign) from the book we are reading and write a sentence using as many words as possible at one time. They then have to draw a picture of their sentence. This makes for some strange and funny results like, “The barbarian plodded through the rice paddy looking for a midwife.” It helps students learn to use new words in their writing and also helps them remember the words. *(Alison Fagg)*

- **Dictionary challenge:** I once had students in groups challenge other groups by using the dictionary to find “new and



usable” words, then pass the list to the next group for sentence-writing. Yes, the second group had to go to the dictionary to find the meanings before they wrote their sentences! (*Grace Raffaele*)

- **Alphabetic adjectives (from Irondale, the Brooklyn theatrical research ensemble):** In half-class teams anyone at random on a team calls out an adjective, starting with A, and anyone on the same team continues calling out adjectives in alphabetical order until the team gets to Z. If anyone calls out anything out of alphabetic order or a word that isn’t an adjective, play goes to the other team. Whichever team gets furthest into the alphabet wins. I added several variations on this game by asking for adjectives that were positive or negative, by going backwards alphabetically, or by asking only for adjectives that apply to a character. (*Julie Merker*)

- **Mnemonics:** Prior to testing, I give a homework assignment requiring students to create a two- or three-word phrase containing a vocabulary word that would serve as a mnemonic and write it in large print on an 8x10 paper or sheet of looseleaf. We post these around the room and leave them up for a couple of days prior to the test so that students can study them in this context. (*Julie Merker*)

- **Using the words again and again:** The words my students learn are from articles they read in newspapers. We collectively skim the article and find the words, trying not to have more than 10. Then I’ll use the words over and over and over again. For example, as they walk in the room the next day I might ask each of them a question using the word. At first they think I’m nuts asking them these crazy questions, but soon they catch on. I do it for several days, but just for a few minutes. The best is when we see the same word again in another article and some of them remember it. (*Jackie Leopold*)

POINT OF VIEW

Whether inventing a “ghost chapter” a novelist never wrote, rewriting *Beowulf* in rap, or imagining how you’d feel as a soldier going off to war, playing with point of view* can be a very powerful way to immerse yourself in a topic. Often in English and history classes, we limit student writing about books and events to a kind of dry content analysis or summary. Point-of-view writing can achieve some of the same goals, but can engage students more deeply. As teacher-consultant Kate Moss asks about reading utopian novels, “If one problem is the distance students perceive between their lives and the texts, maybe making their own pieces [from the text] will close that gap. Why not write a sci-fi piece set in Mott Haven, a utopian futuristic piece set in East Harlem, or a fantasy set in Jamaica, Queens?”





• **Letters from the front:** Two teachers with whom I work, David Gribben and Maia Sheppard at Bronx International, have success while teaching World War I with a project called “Letters from the Front.” They ask students to write three letters. The first is as a soldier before he goes to war, explaining to a parent why he is leaving. The second is his letter home, reporting the horrors he has seen on the front lines. And the final is a letter on his way home, reflecting on the war and its casualties. The idea actually came from an old Writing Project newsletter article written by teacher-consultant Barbara Gurr. The students do some great writing; the letters mix historical fact with emotion! (*Ed Osterman*)

• **How Curley’s wife might see things:** A successful point-of-view assignment I do is asking middle school students to rewrite the scene in *Of Mice and Men* when Lennie kills Curley’s wife – but this time from her point of view. They begin to see the contrast between Lennie’s innocence and his violence. (*Amanda Gulla*)

• **Ghost chapters:** At three points in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* we write a quick draft of a “ghost chapter”: a prologue for their time in Weed; a “new ending” for the story when it looks like they are going to accomplish their dream with Candy’s help; and an epilogue to describe what happens to the characters after Lennie’s death. After we have finished the novel students choose one of those first drafts and turn it into a final after some revising. We look at dialogue, story structure and show-not-tell description throughout this process. At the very end of this unit students usually read their story aloud to a group. (*JoAnna Bueckert*)

• **Scenes cut in rehearsal:** When I teach American plays, I ask students “What scenes might have been cut out on the road or in rehearsal?” What scene did Tennessee Williams write for *Glass Menagerie* that they decided was not needed in Boston prior to the NY opening? What did Arthur Miller write but not use for *Death of a Salesman*? We brainstorm possible missing scenes – events that take place before the play begins, scenes that take place “off-stage,” incidents that might occur after the final curtain comes down. Then the class works in groups, and each group takes a scene. They write it and then perform it for the class. (*Ed Osterman*)

• **Characters in the future:** The best assignment I do for *A Raisin in the Sun* is asking students to write the play in the future. When we finish reading the whole play, I ask them what they think happens to the characters anywhere from the next day all the way up to 20 years later. It’s a wonderful exercise to enhance understanding of characterization, dialogue writing, story telling, and conflict. (*Sally McMahon*)

• **Letter after death:** When I do *Of Mice and Men* with sophomores, I ask them at the end of the book to think about George ten years later. Where is he? Does he have guilt? What happened to him? I ask them to write a letter, as if they are George, to be opened after his death. In this letter he should unburden himself to someone he loves about Lennie and the decision he made that day.

(Ed Osterman)

• **Beowulf in rap:** Some of my eleventh grade students once decided on their own to retell *Beowulf* using rap instead of Old English. I had originally wanted the kids to select a part of *Beowulf* to perform for the class in order for them to hear the rhythm and the interior line break using consonant alliteration of Old English, which I had taught and wanted them to know. Instead, a few “disobedient” kids rewrote their chosen section in rap form – another oral form. The raps were very good, kept to the spirit of *Beowulf*, and worked with the rules of that poetic form. Their performances were outstanding, full of joy and totally engaging. Because of them, I modified the assignment to something like – prepare and perform in both/either the traditional Old English form and/or rewrite and perform using a traditional rap form. It was lots of fun and, as an unexpected bonus, since it was the first reading of the year, we bonded as a class, and had a real learning community that lasted all term. The “disobedient” students were charmed and charming from then on. (Lucie Harris)

• **Mock World War II newspapers:** My history class is structured around an essential question: “What were the rights and responsibilities of Americans in the 20th century?” As the culmination of our study of World War II, I ask students to create mock newspapers based on the events of the war. In particular, each newspaper has to be focused around America’s response to the Holocaust. Each newspaper has to include the following subjects:

1. The Treaty of Versailles
2. A biographical article on Adolph Hitler
3. America’s response to the Holocaust
4. The Nuremberg Trials

Students also have to use varied forms: news article, editorial, letter to the editor, and biographical account. Each article also has to be written as if it were during that time, with no knowledge of what was to happen next. Historically accurate dates and details are essential. Students have the opportunity to assume different viewpoints as they write about facts and events, and discover their position on what America’s responsibility toward the Holocaust should have been. By writing in such varied forms, students also learn some of the different components of a newspaper. (Josh Heisler)



• **Images of Nazism:** We have our eighth graders look at images of the Holocaust and respond in three ways:

1. Write as one of the Jewish people in the photograph and describe what is going on. Explain your emotions and thoughts: what you were thinking?
2. Choose another photo and imagine you are a Nazi soldier on trial. Write the explanation you would give about this scene.
3. Choose another photo and imagine that you are an American journalist who is reporting over the radio. Write the radio report of what you have witnessed. Remember, your audience can only hear you and cannot see you, so be descriptive.

I should add that in order to ask for writing like this, we have been very careful about the variety of beliefs and backgrounds in the room. We try to make sure everyone feels “safe” with the topics and images. *(Grace Raffaele)*

TEXT-ON-TEXT



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Writing Project teachers at all grade levels have noticed that it is not enough simply to ask students to “respond to a text in writing,” but that we must explicitly model how to do this. One technique the Writing Project uses to encourage close reading and responding is called text-on-text*. By pasting onto large paper an enlarged version of an important passage, image, document, poem, quote, or any other item you would like students to observe closely, and having them read and write about it in groups, students see the text differently. They begin to notice more and more detail as they begin to have a “conversation on paper” about it. Though ways to adapt this exercise are virtually unlimited, here are some ways we have done it.

• **Text-on-text in social studies:** Two colleagues of mine use text-on-text effectively. One is studying South Africa, David Gribben of Bronx International HS, and he asks his ELL students to respond on large paper and in silence to quotations and/or images on violence. Each small group first gets an image or quote of its own pasted onto newsprint, and they respond to it. They then move, as a group, around the room to add their thoughts and questions to the comments other groups make on their own sheets of newsprint.

Another teacher, Lisa Bhungalia, formerly of Morris High School, goes online and finds dozens of quotes from Malcolm X. She breaks the class into small groups and asks each group to select the quotes they find most interesting. She then distributes newsprint to each group. Each student in each group selects one quote. They write out their selected quote in red ink and then write an explication below it in blue ink. In the center of the newsprint, each group has to make a list of

the values and beliefs they felt these quotes reflected. The next day each group presents their newsprint to the class. This list of core beliefs can then be referred to, added to, questioned and revised as they proceed through the reading of the book. This activity provides a frame of sorts for the students as they discuss the autobiography and connects to some of the writing they do along the way. (*Ed Osterman*)

• **Text-on-text with a novel:** To get students used to the language of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I use a machine our school has that turns a piece of paper into a poster. I photocopy and enlarge the passage in the second chapter where Janie is lying under the pear tree and watching the bees. I give the students a series of steps to go through in groups:

1. Read it three times.
2. Describe (next to each paragraph) the contents of each paragraph.
3. Describe (on the bottom) how Janie's feelings change in the course of the passage. What words or images support this? Look for words and images that suggest religion and sexuality.
4. Underline the words and draw pictures on every image.
5. Identify the literary term for the image if you can. What does Janie long for? How do the images and diction support this ideal of marriage?

I do this in a series of steps. The posters end up covered with writing and lovely pictures. Then we talk. By the end the students understand a major theme of the book: what Janie wants. I think that this passage is key, so it is worth spending time going into such depth with it. (*Laurie Harriton*)

• **Other supports for text-on-text:** Before doing text-on-text, I always provide prompts to help students get started responding. ("This reminds me of...", "I don't agree, because...", "I don't understand...") In the past couple of years, I have also asked students to paraphrase or summarize one of the texts after all the moving in groups and reading has occurred. They sometimes also write/talk about what they thought the text meant *before* the pass-around and what they think it means *afterwards*. Responding is important but I like to provide support for what can be more challenging for students – actually articulating what the text is saying. (*Donna Mehle*)

LITERATURE CIRCLES

Many of us have experimented with book groups in our classrooms, sometimes employing Harvey Daniels's structures in his book, *Literature Circles* (2001, 2nd edition), and other times inviting students just to talk without these structures. Below, two teachers experienced with book groups offer their advice, and another teacher writes about



an experience with reading partners.

• **Tips for book groups:** Every term I try book groups, and every term I learn something new. You have to resign yourself to the fact that they will get off task a lot. With that in mind, here are some things that work for me:

1. I give the class at least ten suggestions for books that are available in the school. I hand out a sheet with a description of each book. I bring in the loose copies of the books and distribute them to groups.
2. I ask for students to volunteer their favorite book, or a book they've been dying to read. I tell students who want a particular book that they can lobby for their book. The only rule on the book is they must convince at least two other people to read it with them. This can make for spirited discussion.
3. Accept all titles. Last year the hot books were Sister Souljah's *Coldest Winter Ever*, Teri Wood's *True to the Game*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It*. One girl was so excited about *Coldest Winter* that three quarters of the class decided to read it. If one group is reading *Lord* (a long book) and another is reading *A Child Called It* (very short), the group with *Child* has to agree to do an author study and read at least one other David Peltzer book.
4. Give them time to read in class.
5. Give each group a folder for written work. Students put their names on every piece of paper they have written.
6. Don't assign roles. In my experience, they don't like them and don't do them. But check each piece of paper, each piece of writing, and assign grades. The kid who does a reading log, reflections, and a character study gets an A. The kid who did nothing gets a D.
7. Have whole-class assignments. Do a one-pager* and let the other groups see what everyone is doing. Try to find general questions for a whole-class discussion.
8. Give them board notes: "Today you should be" and give direction. Assign a reflection or assignment after each class session.
9. Let groups meet at least three times a week.
10. Get earplugs. It will be noisy. But worth it, really.

(Sally McMahon)

• **More tips for book groups:** I believe book groups need to be done in the later half of the year. You need to know your students very well as readers and you need to make sure that you have provided many in-class experiences that model how to respond in writing to literature and how to talk about it. Some things to consider before doing book groups:

1. Have the students had a lot of experience working in groups



- and having discussions about literature prior to book groups?
2. What books will be used? They absolutely *must* be engaging. That is the single biggest factor.
 3. You need to model roles for discussion. If you use Harvey Daniels's role sheets from his book, *Literature Circles*, you must model the roles in class. In other words, have the whole class read a story and then ask students to respond in a particular way/role. I'd do this several times so they have experienced and discussed a range of roles as a whole class prior to any small group work.
 4. Are students keeping up with the reading? They must be engaging and they need to be at most of the students' independent reading level.

(Ed Osterman)

- **Reading buddies:** To support an independent reading project in which a class of seniors tackles a range of challenging books, we have each student find an adult who can serve as a reading partner. We post the list of books being read and the students reading them, and then we invite colleagues to join one of the students in reading and discussing a book. The end result is that sometimes students approach teachers, sometimes teachers approach students, and sometimes students find a parent, older sibling, or college-aged friend who would like to work with them. (Gail Kleiner and Georgia Christgau)



READING POETRY

Because poetry can seem more difficult than other genres to many students, many of us have developed ways to ease our students into studies of particular poets or poetic styles. Here are some ways we have made poetry “come alive” in our classrooms.

- **Poetry jigsaw:** At a Writing Project conference, a colleague from the High School for Health Careers and Sciences did a workshop called “Wordsworth Jigsaw.” He used a different Wordsworth poem for each initial “expert” group, and then in “mixed” groups asked students to share their expertise. The mixed groups then listed qualities of Wordsworth’s subjects and language that were evident in all three of their poems, and also listed questions they had. The idea was to have students read and discover the writer independently before he “taught” Wordsworth. He did two rounds of this (6 poems) as a launch of a Wordsworth study. You could certainly adapt the exercise using shorter or “easier” poems or authors. (Margaret Fiore)

- **Pairing poetry and art:** Kenneth Koch’s *Talking to the Sun* (1985) is a beautiful book and models the idea of pairing poems with works of art. I use this idea in two ways. First, as a poetry introduction activity, I bring in lots and lots of poetry books and have kids look

through to find a favorite – then I have them look through the post-cards to find a “match.” They then copy the poem and write a short index card that explains why they paired the two. Finally, I display the poems and the postcards on the wall. I also use this idea at the end of a unit by bringing in postcards from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and having kids write a poem to go with it. The pictures offer great prompts to those who “don’t know what to write about.”

(Grace Raffaele)

• **Collecting poems:** Students can choose a theme (nature, relationships, dreams, sex, music, or anything else) and collect poems on that theme which “speak” to them. Each student can then put the poems together into individual anthologies. They can even write introductions to their collections in which they discuss some of the poems and why they chose them. It’s a good way to get students to look at a lot of poetic styles and helps them to articulate their reading preferences and offer definitions about what makes a “good” poem.

(Tyler Schmidt)

• **Bringing poetry alive:** A poetry/drama exercise I have always loved is one I learned from the Writing Project in the 1980’s. Introduce a poem to the class by having individuals first freewrite about it, then meet in groups to talk about what they wrote. You then tell the groups that they have one class period to create and rehearse a “reading” of this poem that somehow “brings it alive” and that they will perform the next day. Encourage them to use their voices and bodies to emphasize what they find meaningful about the poem. They can use staging, lighting, costumes, music, props, or any other theatrical device they can come up with in one period and/or for homework that night. (Often I allow one group at a time to leave the room and rehearse in the hallway or an empty classroom nearby.) For beginning poetry readers in my classes, some of Langston Hughes’ more story-like poems work well for this exercise. It’s a fascinating exercise: every group will do a different reading of the same poem, and different nuances of meaning will thereby emerge. Afterwards you can have them write about what they now think they know about this poem and compare it to what they originally wrote. *(Katherine Schulten)*

• **Pairing poems:** I like to consider poems of different eras together. The most wildly successful pair for me is “Fire and Ice,” by Robert Frost, and “Sonnet 30” from *Amoretti* by Edmund Spenser. These two poems are amazing to consider simultaneously. As I teach them each time it’s as if two distinct world views become visible, and it’s easy and exciting to talk and write about. Sometimes I ask students to pose as Spenser or Frost writing to each other in response to the other’s poem; sometimes I ask them to write a poem updating Frost’s view to the contemporary moment. *(Martin Brown)*



• **Poetry in a social/historical context:** Two eighth-grade teachers I worked with at IS 218, Jennifer Rygalski and Dorian Herron, do a unit on looking at poetry in a social and historical context. Working with the same classes, we use text-on-text* conversations, double entry*, and point-of-view writing* to look at poems that reflect issues in relation to Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement. In the social studies class, students do a text-on-text with the lyrics of "Strange Fruit," followed by point-of-view writing. In the English class, we look at three poems with the image of a caged bird: Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "Sympathy," Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," and Alicia Keys's "Caged Bird." We talk about how the historical and social context in which each poem was written shaped the language, the content, and the point of view. (*Amanda Gulla*)

• **Draw a poem:** Poetry and art are a natural fit, and can be used together to help students intimidated by poetry. For example, as a first response to a poem, you can ask students to draw an image that occurred to them as they read. This gives them a place to begin thinking and talking together about what the poem says to them. One poem I often use for this is Billy Collins's "Instructions to the Artist" (from *Questions About Angels: Poems*). I put it onto poster-sized paper and invite students to draw it. It begins "I wish my head to appear perfectly round/and since the canvas should be of epic dimensions,/please trace the circle with a dinner plate/rather than a button or a dime." It is very explicit, and fun to draw. (*Margaret Fiore*)

• **Poetry think-aloud:** I have been trying to show my students that thinking aloud while reading a difficult text can be helpful, but they are resistant. I think it was in Christine Cziko's book, *Reading for Understanding* (1999) (co-authored with Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, and Lori Hurwitz), that I read the suggestion of having the kids bring in lyrics from songs they liked and then having teachers do "think alouds" on these texts. Wherever I got the idea, I did it at the beginning of a poetry unit last year with exciting results. I have many Caribbean students so the songs were as challenging to me as a Shakespearean sonnet is to them. What was good was that they knew the words and the music so my stumbling after meaning did not interfere with their own approaches to the material. Furthermore, my age and linguistic experience gave them an opportunity to see their own music in new ways and with new understanding. They laughed at some of my ideas, they struggled to find words to explain slang phrases to me, we had a good time, and they saw thinking aloud as a useful rather than annoying approach to a difficult text. (*Joe Bellacero*)

SHAKESPEARE

Teaching Shakespeare can be an intimidating task, even for experienced teachers. In these entries Writing Project teachers share



strategies that have worked for getting students immersed in Shakespearean language, characters, conflicts, and themes.

- **Putting Shakespeare on his feet:** My experience with Shakespeare is as an actor, and I've found that taking a theatrical approach works best with students as well. I highly recommend the *Shakespeare Set Free* series from the Folger Shakespeare Library for tips on putting Shakespeare "on his feet." I also got many of my ideas from a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar sponsored by Southern Oregon University and coordinated by Professor Alan Armstrong.

First I edit the play, just as a director would, and I hand out the edited script in pieces, complete with lines crossed out. I begin by taking snippets of language from the play and giving each student a line. We stand in a circle, practice pronunciation, and discuss meaning briefly, then "toss" the language to each other while tossing a beanbag around. Afterwards, I'll ask them to infer what the play is going to be about based upon those snippets. I also begin by taking a famous soliloquy and typing it up large. Each student in the circle gets a line of the soliloquy and we go around a few times. They can "spray paint" in the air a word from their line they want to emphasize, stamp their foot on a word, or sing the line. All of these exercises get kids used to the language while emphasizing the performance aspect of the text. Another thing I've done is to divide the play's plot up into little summaries and give each group a summary from which to make a "tableau" or improvisation. We then act these out for each other. In this way, students become familiar with the plot before reading.

While I'm working on a play, I create a graffiti wall where students can scribble and draw favorite lines and images as they go. I also like using a "chorus" during scenes. A chorus is a group of four to seven kids who stand on "stage" and create a sound and a movement for various moments in the scene I want to emphasize (which I've planned out before). This is a great way to involve students who like to perform but are nervous about reading. I usually begin scenes with an improvisation of the situation in a modern day setting. For example, before doing the scene where Lady Macbeth tries to get Macbeth to commit the murder, we might do a scene with a friend trying to pressure another friend to shoplift. To do this, everyone stands back-to-back with a partner; on the count of three, they turn and begin the improv. Afterwards, volunteers show what they have to the whole class. In this way, they've got the setup for the scene we're working on. I am convinced that when Shakespeare is approached from an acting standpoint, kids fall in love with the plays. (*Donna Mehle*)

- **Tips for working with any Shakespearean play:** I have always found that point-of-view writing at key points in the plays helps in teaching Shakespeare. It worked for me with *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and



Romeo and Juliet. Diary entries as characters, letters to and from characters, news articles when someone is murdered or banished, editorials and letters to the editor, obituaries, dialogue Shakespeare never wrote – all of these work. With *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, I do mock newspapers with students reporting on events (“Banquo disappears,” “Duncan is murdered,” “Fight in the square leads to death of ...”). I also do interviews with characters.

I advise teachers to begin a Shakespearean play in class. Do lots of reading aloud together first; get them comfortable with language, and get them to predict and react.

I also use film at key points. Usually, after Act One, I show them Act One of a good film version. It gives students a sense of the visuals and clears up much that may have confused them. Then, I show them a film version again much, much later. My advice with film is, choose carefully and break it up. It can be fun to show the same scene from different versions – the bedroom/Polonius’s death scene in *Hamlet*, for example, is fun to watch in different versions. Or to look at a traditional *Romeo and Juliet* scene from the 1968 version and contrast it with the same scene from the 1996 Baz Luhrmann version or from *West Side Story*.

A colleague once told me that when she taught *Macbeth*, she concluded the play by dividing the class into groups. Each group was responsible for one act. They had to do a 10-minute presentation of the act’s events – in any style and any period they wanted. Then, on a given day, all five groups presented, in sequence. A riot of styles, to be sure, but that was part of the fun. They videotaped the whole thing. (*Ed Osterman*)

• **Reader-response Shakespeare:** I treat Shakespeare in a reader-response way. I give each of my Lehman College students their own sonnet to work on and they memorize and present them toward the end of the semester. I give them the “official” background on the sonnets with the young man and the “dark lady,” but I let them respond from their own experiences. Some of them have a woman writing to a man, others a man writing to a man, a man writing to a woman, or a man writing to himself. This may be unorthodox, but I treat the plays this way as well. I let them have their own responses to things like Sebastian and Antonio’s relationship in *Twelfth Night*, or Romeo and Juliet’s love (or is it lust?), or the question of whether *Hamlet* is a tragedy of character, fate, or circumstance. I let them decide when the turning point in *Hamlet* might have been and don’t insist on one particular point. In this way, I hope that they might “own” Shakespeare and be “turned on” enough to read and see more, more, more. Usually they wrap themselves around the words and the words wrap themselves around them right from the beginning, and it is magical. (*Mary Carroll*)



• **Shakespeare comics:** One option I offer for responding to Shakespearean text is to make comics of the scenes. My purpose is to monitor comprehension, and when I reproduce and distribute these student-generated comics, I can see it helps students who struggle with the text to visualize it. (It's also fun because of the juxtaposition of era and medium.) A comic, however, is inadequate – just as a cold reading is. The bottom line for teaching Shakespeare: bring your students to a performance, or stage a performance in class.

(Julie Merker)

• **Elizabethan newspaper:** To give extra support to special education students when studying *Romeo and Juliet*, we have them create an Elizabethan newspaper. First we read a narrative version of the play and watch the Zeffereilli film, then we give them copies of local newspapers and examine the various news and feature sections with them. Students brainstorm which sections they would like to include in their own newspaper. Next, they conduct research in the school library on a range of topics related to Shakespeare and Elizabethan times. For example, for the sports section, they research hunting and wrestling; for the “lifestyles” section they research food and table manners. They also create illustrations for each section. The students keep journals throughout the project and use them to share ideas with the class. The unit concludes with a close examination of the balcony scene in Shakespeare’s original text, in the Zeffereilli film, and in the recent Leonardo DiCaprio version. They compare the three versions and rewrite the scene into contemporary English. Throughout, nearly everyone is interested and motivated.

(Vivian Daher and Lisa Miller)

• **Sketching the scene:** Before my students see any production of a play, via video or live, I like to have them read stage directions and a scene or two. Then I ask them to try to make a little sketch of one of these early scenes. I emphasize that the quality of the drawing doesn't matter; it's just like a note to oneself. I give out index cards, and have them sketch on the unlined (back) of the card. The sketch has value even if the scenes change, because students have gotten started on the effort to imagine the action. Creating a “theater in your head” is a very great challenge in reading a play, for any of us. On the lined side of the card, students copy the cast of characters (if necessary writing in very tiny letters to fit them all in), and an identifying phrase (“Hamlet’s mother,” etc.) to help them remember who the person is. These index cards become bookmarks for use during the reading, making it easier to re-check an identity rather than needing to return to the opening page. *(Thomasina LaGuardia)*



HISTORICAL FICTION AND NONFICTION

Often as history or English teachers, we teach content that is remote in time, place, and culture from our students' experience. To help them make connections between the past and their own lives, many of us have developed techniques that bring these distant places, people, and events to life. Besides having students write in forms as varied as timelines, travel brochures, and science fiction stories, many Writing Project teachers also do "gallery walks."* These promote critical literacy by engaging students in multiple, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives through the words, images, and sounds of a particular time and place.

• **Mini-biographies of nineteenth-century immigrants:** In my American humanities class where there is insufficient time to "cover" the various immigrations and migrations of nineteenth-century history, I do a "mini-biography" project instead. I assign a research project in which each student creates a life for a putative person. (Although one person is real – my immigrant great-grandfather, whose discharge papers from the Union Army are still in the family.) I make sure to vary the people. I create characters like a Japanese immigrant to Washington State; a formerly enslaved person who migrated to Kansas; a mail-order bride; a "buffalo cowboy"; a pioneer woman; an Irish immigrant "bought" to take someone else's place in the Civil War; and a Chinese railroad worker. I do my own research first to find an appropriate photo and various facts, documents, etc. in order to give a skeleton life to each person. I also add some "factoids" of my own where necessary. To this one-page skeleton, the students have to add the flesh.

In all, I create eleven portraits for a class of thirty-three, making three copies of all of the photos and artifacts. These are presented to the students randomly, as they sit in three circles of eleven. The task is to create a life for the person the students are holding in front of them. There are no limits as to how far the life could range or in what format the life could be presented. The only requirement is that whatever happened in the person's life has to be historically accurate. (In other words it has to have been both possible and logical to have happened at that point in time.)

We discuss the various formats that might be used for presentation: diary, newspaper obituary, epistles, "traditional" research paper, etc. Within each circle, students are able to trade people, and among circles, students are allowed to research together or separately. If students choose to share research on the same person, each student has to choose a unique format for presentation.

As with all research projects, I enlist the aid of the school's librarian first. Appropriate texts are put on reserve for the students and as a



class we spend three days in the library, one for the librarian to show how she would research a putative person (we create a separate one for her), and two days for the students to begin their research with the librarian and me there as resources.

Some of the most satisfying days in my teaching life have been the days on which these projects are due. I ask the students to hold up their presentations, which come in all shapes and formats, and to take turns reading lines from their own work. There follows a flood of heartbreaking, touching, informed, humorous, thoughtful, original voices. The students become quite attached to “their” people, even those who originally felt no affinity for them. It is half *Spoon River*, half History Channel. (*Julie Merker*)

- **Timelines:** When teaching *A Raisin in the Sun*, I help students understand what life was like for African-Americans at the time of the play by having them create timelines. To do this, I give them handouts of various timelines from the era and ask them to choose and copy anything they find significant to the play or to African-American lives. They then use these notes to create their own timelines. A more advanced class could create timelines by watching documentaries like *Eyes on the Prize* and noting important events, or by doing library research. Students could also be invited to add visuals to their timelines. (*Jackie Leopold*)

- **Time travel stories:** When we read Octavia Butler’s novel about the antebellum South, *Kindred*, I have students write their own short stories of a trip back in time to that period. First I have them find examples of historical details in the novel. They also go on-line to read links about the period that I find for them. They annotate these links and find historical details they might want to use in their own short stories. The next step is to help them develop characters, then work on a conflict for their stories. Finally, they set a theme or a purpose for the stories. More advanced students might also try to use foreshadowing, irony, or other literary devices if they choose. (*Peggy Maslow*)

- **“Onlookers” journals:** While studying Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, one thing teachers at Lower East Side Prep do is ask students to keep journals as “onlookers” as they read. These onlookers might be other slaves, employees of the plantation, or members of the owners’ families. Because they do this in connection with the American Social History Project, students can also use some of their primary source documents in order to make their diaries more historically accurate. (*Barbara Martz*)

- **Travel brochures to the thirteen colonies:** In my seventh-grade social studies class, I have students in small groups conduct research on one of the original thirteen colonies. After investigating



the history, philosophy, and daily life of that colony, I have them create a travel brochure for one of the colonies. The completed brochures are eye-catching and use the information they collect through research. (*Amy Arundell*)

• **Anthropologist's report:** When I teach Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, I ask students to pretend they are anthropologists studying a new culture. When they have almost finished the novel, I divide them into groups and ask them to search through the work for examples of the habits and customs of the Ibo people. They create three-column charts to record their findings. In the first column they give specific examples, along with a quote and a page number. In the second column the "anthropologists" note how each custom or habit is different from or similar to their own culture or values. In the last column they comment on how that custom or habit shows what the Ibo people value. These charts are then used to support a writing assignment in which each student writes as either an Ibo anthropologist studying American culture, or as an American anthropologist studying Ibo culture. (*Eugene Lim*)

• **Political posters:** To study the medieval period, my students watch *Braveheart* and create political posters expressing a point of view. After we watch the film (interrupting the action at points for writing and discussion), the class generates lists of major issues in the film, like loyalty, betrayal, love, and power. We talk about political posters and look at models. Then groups design their posters based on these issues by choosing a character and creating a slogan expressing his or her point of view about an issue. ("Tell our rulers they may take our lives but not our freedom," one student wrote from Wallace – or "Braveheart's" – point of view.) We display the posters around the room as we continue with our study of the period. (*Lisa Lauritzen*)

• **Gallery walks:** Gallery walks* have become popular among many Writing Project teachers, thanks to teacher-consultants Debi Freeman and Lucie Harris who introduced them to us. Recently we have seen gallery walks done for a broad range of topics: India, African-American Migration, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Holocaust, Einstein, women's role in history, Ireland, the Bronx in the 50's, the Dustbowl. They can take an enormous amount of preparation, but the finished product is always exciting. Here are two excellent examples I've seen recently:

Ansley Erickson, Linas Gintoff, Josh Heisler, Vicki Ross-Norris, and José Sanchez at School for Excellence created a gallery walk on African-American history and set it up for all of their classes to visit in one room. There was an enormous variety of material: quotations, poems, biographical pieces from the Internet, photo graphs, posters, a series of gorgeous reprints from Jacob Lawrence's *Black Migration* series, jazz playing, CD-ROMs, a silent





video from the PBS African-American series, picture books, and a tape recording of speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. The materials were in six stations organized by theme: Slavery; Life in the South after the Civil War; Civil Rights Movement; Art and Music; Famous African-Americans; and Jazz. Students were given double-entry charts for notes and were told to select one artifact from each table, describe it, tell why they selected it, and what they learned. When the gallery walk ended, these teachers all brought the materials back again to use in the teaching of the rest of the unit.

My colleague Eulalia Vinas put together a gallery walk on the Caribbean with her Spanish classes. She teaches two levels of Spanish in the same room, often shuttling back and forth between the two groups. She decided to use the gallery walk as a way to unite these groups. The focus was Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. The class brainstormed themes (arts and crafts, food, music, history, geography and climate, tourism, famous people) and then divided into mixed groups. Each group researched its topic and then had to design a poster/table for their theme.

This took the class several weeks of periodic small group work with Spanish One students working alongside Spanish Two students.

As we entered the gallery walk classroom on the day it was held, on the wall were two posters of questions, one in Spanish and one in English. Students and invited guests had to walk around the room and answer these questions by visiting and reading the various “exhibits” and tables. Afterwards we ate, listened to music and were treated to one or two presentations. This was a bit different from some of the other gallery walks I have seen – more structured in some ways and more open-ended in others – but I loved the use of questions to guide our looking. (*Ed Osterman*)

DIFFERENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

If we know how to engage our students in open-minded observation, analysis, and discussion, the differences between us can deeply and positively inform our students’ learning. As in the entries in the Historical Fiction and Nonfiction section that precedes this, the suggestions below are intended to help teachers bridge a gap between their students’ experiences and that of those they may regard as “other” – whether those differences are based on race, religion, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or language.

- **Injustice inquiry:** I do an inquiry unit on discrimination/oppression/injustice. Through reading, writing, and discussion, we brainstorm groups who were at one time discriminated against or oppressed. As the blackboard fills, it becomes clear that at one point in time, everyone has been a victim. The assignment that follows asks the

question: What do Nelson Mandela, Gloria Steinem, César Chávez and Joe Dougherty have in common? After we answer that they all basically fought for freedom of the oppressed, we begin the research/I-Search project. The assignment is simple: Find one group (other than your own) who has been discriminated against. Read about them, and write about their situation. (You can write in any form – a series of poems or journal entries, a short story or play, a research paper, or an essay.) Many students use point-of-view writing to help them feel what the group felt. The work is usually outstanding – I get stuff on Japanese-American prisoners, African-American army units, Northern Ireland, Negro baseball leagues, topics you would not expect. They explore all the issues, and once a girl who is gay actually came out in poetry to the support of her fellow tenth graders. Our librarian is also extremely helpful. She directs kids to interesting topics, and devotes the library to my sophomores to present their work to their classmates and invited ninth grade classes. It's a lot of work, but well worth it. Literature I have used with this project includes *A Raisin in the Sun*, poetry by Julia Alvarez, *Night, Nightjohn, Summer of My German Soldier*, short stories from *Dubliners*, "Something" by David Sedaris, "Indian Education" by Sherman Alexie, "Little Things Are Big" by Jesus Colon, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" or another feminist piece. (Sally McMahon)

- **Ethnic notions:** Every semester that I teach a class that involves the examination of racial/gender stereotypes and misconceptions, I use Marlon Riggs' 1987 documentary *Ethnic Notions*. It is a perfect tool to help our students question the roots of prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination. It also helps them to question the media, and to question what they take in as consumers and as audiences. (Shirley Wu)

- **The N word:** I had an experience with Dorian Herron, an eighth-grade teacher at IS 218, and his class looking at the "N" word in the context of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The teacher (who is African-American) asked students to create a chart and note throughout the book who used the word, whom that character was addressing, and what feeling or attitude the student thought each character meant to project by using that word. This led to a lively class discussion of the students' own use of the word, as well as the use of other pejoratives aimed at specific groups. ("Gay" as a pejorative and "bitch" also came into the discussion.) The great thing was that the book became a catalyst for students looking at their own behavior in a social context, while learning about the changing history of that particular word. (Amanda Gulla)

- **Talking about gender:** Norma Morales and I do a project in advisory about stereotypes and images of gender. We ask students to do list-making as a beginning: "Boys are..." / "Girls are..." and then "Boys don't" / "Girls don't...". We then move into a definition of



gender and begin to look at how parents and culture very much shape our behaviors and attitudes. We put media up front – movies, television, advertising, and music. We also read and discuss stories written by and about teen boys and girls. The final project is to have students write about an experience in their own lives that touches on what it means to be a teenage boy or girl today. Recently we were able to make books of these stories and use them for other advisories to read as well. (*Ed Osterman*)

- **“Girl”/“Boy”:** The story “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid works very well when discussing gender roles. An assignment I like to give after reading it is to have the students write their own version. (This works especially well with diverse populations, in particular ELL students, in bringing out cultural diversity in notions of gender.) I also invite them to write “Boy.” (*Sally McMahon*)

GETTING TO KNOW CHARACTERS

So many of our ideas on the listserv about working with literature involve helping students deeply understand the characters in a story. The entries here, which can be adapted for a range of texts, are whimsical and imaginative ideas to encourage students to “adopt” characters and make them their own.

- **Adopt a character:** When I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* with my juniors, I have them get to know the characters by “adopting” one of them. As we read, they write a ten-entry diary in this character’s voice, giving details and reactions to ten events in which the character is involved. They also must find several descriptive passages about that character in the novel. Next, they do a character sketch giving a personality profile as they see it. The real challenge comes in the final three parts. I ask them to give samples of the character’s speech and analyze it, noting how formal or informal it is, showing metaphors or similes, picking out pet phrases and, in general, noting what makes it distinctive. Next, they evaluate the character’s morals, attitudes, and growth throughout the book. Finally, I push them to try and figure out the author’s purpose in creating the character and to note what themes are developed through his or her actions. (I give them examples of each of the above to help them understand, and we try each in a small way so that I can see if they understand what is needed.) The last three parts of the assignment are very hard for them, but I keep thinking that if we don’t push them to go beyond their personal responses they’ll continue to think school work is either touchy-feely opinions, or just giving back what the teacher says. (*Joe Bellacero*)

- **Character scrapbooks:** I have my students create character scrapbooks as exit projects. These have point-of-view writing by the character, poems about the character, writing about artifacts we



thought would be important to the character, and dialogue writing that is an interview between the student and the character. The books contain a comment page at the end so students can respond to each other's work. Last time I did this, the students were so engrossed in reading and commenting on each other's work that they ignored the breakfast I provided for the celebratory scrapbook reading!

(Julie Conason)

• **Letters to and from characters:** When I'm teaching *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel in which every main character has a secret, a particularly cathartic exercise my students enjoy is writing letters between these characters. I tell them to choose any one of the four main characters (Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, or Pearl) and write a letter in that character's voice and from his or her point of view to any of the other of the four main characters. This letter is their character's chance to finally say what he or she is really thinking and feeling. When they're finished, I ask them to leave their letters on their desks, stand up with their pens in hand, and come to the front of the room. They stand there baffled for a minute until I tell them to pick a random desk, sit down, and answer the letter they find on that desk *as if they were the character to whom it is addressed*. In this way Dimmesdale can tell Hester how he's suffering, Chillingworth can express his suspicions openly, and Hester and Pearl can bond wholeheartedly. *(Katherine Schulten)*

• **Journal prompts for exploring character:** There are two journal prompts I've used successfully with *The Great Gatsby* that could work with many novels. One involves asking students to write or make a list of "Things I've Figured Out That Nick [the protagonist] Hasn't" at a certain point in the story. The other is "I Did That Once" where students write about a time they found themselves in the same predicament as the protagonist or had a similar emotion, conflict, or crisis. *(Dusty Miller)*

• **Retell a story in another voice:** Because he has such a distinctive voice, when we read *Catcher in the Rye* I have students try retelling a well-known children's story as if they are Holden. First we make a list of all of his expressions and other details of the way he talks. Then my students try rewriting something familiar like "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," but telling the story as Holden would. These have come out amazingly funny and focused! This would work with any character whose voice is unique enough to make it instantly recognizable. *(Mary Carroll)*



SUPPORTING READING AND WRITING WITH THE ARTS, GAMES, AND TECHNOLOGY

GAMES

Many of us use games to help students learn or review content. Though formats like “Jeopardy” and bingo are perennially popular, in the entries below teachers describe other games they have played or ways they have encouraged their students to use the notion of “games” in general to design something new for themselves.

- **Who wants to be a literary critic?:** My favorite game that I play with my high school students is “Who Wants to be a Literary Critic?” which is based on “Who Wants to be a Millionaire.” First the kids and I make up multiple-choice questions on the book or unit we just studied. Then, working in pairs or small groups, students come to the “hot seat” and answer successively harder questions. We have “life lines” (ask the class, phone the English department) and “50/50.” Student volunteers record difficult questions and answers on the board, and keep score on the board as well. Prizes include candy, free homework passes, and (for 1,000,000 points) 10 points on the exam. I, or a student volunteer, act as the emcee. *(Sally McMahon)*

- **How a bill becomes a law board game:** A colleague, Jennifer Lee at Bronx International HS, just created a board game for her eleventh graders who are preparing for the U.S. History Regents: “How Does a Bill Become a Law?” She made this game in which the players win once their bill does become a law after surviving committees, vetoes, etc. Each player throws a die, lands on squares which tell him or her certain things, and picks up cards that allow the player to move ahead only if he or she answers the question correctly. The questions focus on the passage of laws, the two houses of Congress, the Presidency, and other relevant topics. And, of course, the road of squares she designed snake in and around the various government houses. The game design made me realize a comparable game could be created for any content unit where a process or journey is involved. *(Ed Osterman)*

- **Learning about games in advisory:** At the end of this year, we are doing an interdisciplinary project in which groups of sixth graders will create a board game using *all* of the subjects and any of the learning in those subjects from this year. We’ll get ready by devoting one period a week in advisory to games and to looking at the game format with the kids. We’ll ask, what different types of games are there? What are the different tasks? What strategies can you use to win? How can you include “content” questions/information? What makes a game fun? We will also enlist the art teacher to help us with resources – like pre-making the boards and combing Canal Plastics for



cool playing pieces. *(Grace Raffaele)*

- **Adding in writing:** When making games, the important thing to remember is the writing. I have my students write a letter to a toy company or video game company “pitching” their game before they start creating it. This way they have to think through the game first. Squares on the board can highlight important plot elements. Characters can be described and move around the board. Symbolism is a big part of these projects, both through how characters are portrayed and through illustration. *(Sally McMahon)*

- **Designing video games:** I have high school students design video games based on novels because so many of them already understand the language of those kinds of games. I have found that video game manuals can work excellently for character analysis because they describe the characters’ abilities and traits. Visuals also come into play tremendously: students can create illustrations or collages to depict the characters and their adventures. Obviously the video game can’t actually be played, but it can be described and illustrated and packaged. *(Sally McMahon)*

DEBATE

Used as a way to engage students in exploring specific issues or historical eras, debates can be structured formally or informally. Here are some ways we have used them:

- **Instant debates:** I have been doing “instant debates” for a few years now. If my class comes upon an area of disagreement, I quickly divide the class in two without regard to each student’s position. Students then have seven minutes to prepare a single student to present that group’s assigned side of the issue. If there is enough time, I allow a rebuttal, with a second student prepared to reply. This exercise has been so powerful in helping my students understand both sides of an issue that they will often change their minds and associate with the side they were put on rather than their initial position. *(Joe Bellacero)*

- **Should we have dropped the bomb?:** Many of my colleagues at both School for Excellence and Bronx International HS use debate in interesting ways. In Josh Heisler’s and Linas Gintoff’s classrooms, they use it as a way to review the content of their World War II unit. After they spend time reading textbooks and first person accounts, viewing films, and studying historical documents, they pose the question, “Was America right in dropping the atom bomb on Hiroshima?” To encourage students to refer to the background information they learned, they give groups points for every piece of evidence they can cite from a text. *(Ed Osterman)*



• **From debate to essay:** As preparation for writing an essay, my colleague Maia Sheppard's class at Bronx International HS debates the question, "Did the Industrial Revolution have a more positive or a more negative impact on British society?" The debate serves as a way for them to think through issues and marshal evidence to support their positions. Because students are required to refer to Regents documents in their arguments, the next logical step is to have them write a practice "Document-Based Question" essay on the topic. *(Ed Osterman)*

DRAMA

Using drama in the classroom is not only a fun way to involve students, it is also a way to ensure they learn the material we are teaching. As Donna Mehle, a teacher who is also an actor, wrote about having her students create "tableaux" on the Treaty of Versailles, "Whenever we ask students to engage with ideas through their bodies, chances are that they'll remember these ideas." From elaborate stage presentations done over many days to simple "tableaux" that take just a few minutes, here are some ways to use drama to help your students explore and interpret a topic.

• **Supreme Court talk show:** When I taught American Government, I introduced the talk show format to explore key decisions of the Supreme Court. My aim was to take everybody back in time, before the actual decision was rendered, to get a sense of the emotions, points of view, and constitutional issues surrounding each case. First the students would cluster in small groups to identify the issues and opposing arguments. Following this, selected students became panel members on a talk show. Each panel member role-played someone with a point of view on the issue. The rest of the class was the audience. Audience members would challenge the panel members to defend their positions, and the exchanges got wonderfully heated. Toward the end of the lesson, a reporter would "pre-empt the program" to announce the Court's decision, "live from the steps of the Supreme Court." The excitement was palpable. Of course, the follow-up assignment was to write a persuasive commentary on the outcome. As the semester evolved, my role in the process became minimal. Actually, all I did was take attendance and sit in the audience. The students picked the cases, determined the roles and role players and played all the parts. One budding filmmaker in the class videotaped the shows, which we would watch the next day. That class and I also staged the Senate trial of Bill Clinton in January 1999, and I have those proceedings on videotape, too. *(Diane Giorgi)*

• **Dramatic response to a novel:** A teacher with whom I work at Jane Addams High School, Denise Gokey, invites her eleventh-grade class to form groups and create any kind of dramatic response they



want to Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. In a performance I saw recently, one group of kids chose to role-play the book's characters in a group therapy session on the topic of how religion had influenced their lives, a major theme in the book. The kids sat in a circle, each playing a character from the novel, while a "therapist" character they added asked them questions. The students stayed in character wonderfully well, and had a free-wheeling discussion about the eradication of Native American culture by Christianity. (Katherine Schulten)

• **Constitutional Convention talk show:** Jennifer Lee's ELL students are currently studying the Constitutional Convention. The class had divided into teams to prepare mock talk shows with panels of historical figures debating issues that caused controversy at the Convention. One talk show was about the conflict between representation of large and small states, another on the powers of the federal government. Each talk show had the same structure: three key figures were interviewed, one for each position, and the historical figure who came up with the decision or compromise. On a viewer response sheet, listeners had to identify the issue, each person and his/her position, key vocabulary or terms used, and the solution reached. Of course, there was also space for evaluation. (Ed Osterman)

• **Putting on plays:** Whenever my classes read plays, we always read the parts out loud. I can then prompt kids, "Why did you have John Proctor react in that tone of voice?" or "Did you hear the way she read Mama? What does the way the character speaks tell us?" It also gets the reading done, since many students just don't read at home. What's really fun is to have different groups prepare and present scenes, and let them get up and reconfigure the room into a stage – rows of desks become a jury box with the teacher's desk as the judge's bench. (Sally McMahon)

• **Tableaux from a novel:** Jennifer Lee, my colleague at Bronx International HS, teaches *Nightjohn* using "tableaux." Students come in having selected a quote, passage, or image from the book that made an impact on them. She gives simple instructions: "Share what you chose and select one that you want to demonstrate for the class. You will have 10 minutes to prepare. You are going to show us a frozen, silent picture that exemplifies/demonstrates the quote or moment. There can be no, or at least, very little movement. All of you must be in the image. No speaking." Each group performs, we guess what they are depicting, and then hear the quote read aloud. These "tableaux" end up reflecting scenes or passages in the book and lead to a great deal of discussion. (Ed Osterman)



VISUAL ARTS

Making maps, drawing comics, creating collages, designing book covers, or designing memorials: all of these assignments use art to make meaning of content in the literature or history classroom. Used as an occasional alternative to, or support for, reading and writing, art projects often engage students so deeply that writers on the listserv say they “take on a life of their own.”

- **Mapping *To Kill A Mockingbird*:** To begin *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the teachers I work with and I ask students to do some writing about their current neighborhoods. We then ask them to draw a map of their neighborhood when they were younger. This map should show where they hung out; where they couldn’t go; neighbors they liked, hated, thought weird, feared, etc; and places where major events occurred. We refer back to these maps as we move through the first chapters of the novel. We then use newsprint to work together to create a large map of the town in the book. This really helps as more and more characters are introduced and as students begin to see parallels between the characters’ lives and their own. (*Ed Osterman*)

- **Mapping *Huck Finn*:** Having students make a map of the world of a novel can help them keep track of the book’s characters and plot, but it can also help them see graphically what’s important about the novel symbolically and thematically. For instance, I ask my students to make maps of Huck and Jim’s journey in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and to include quotes that show how they feel at different points in the journey. This makes clear to students a crucial point: what happens to Huck and Jim alone on the raft is very different from what happens to them whenever they are in the corrupt “sivilization.” (*Katherine Schulten*)

- **Slavery memorials:** In a class unit on slavery, we study the broader idea of historical memory and the concept of reconciliation for past wrongs in connection with Columbus and the Age of Discovery. We then look at different monuments in the United States that remember historical events. I then ask my students to create a three-dimensional memorial to slavery. Students choose what they would want to memorialize and what they would want people to remember about slavery. They also select their own materials. To accompany the memorial, each student writes a persuasive essay convincing us that a slavery memorial was necessary in the United States. We provide guidelines for these essays to ensure that students support their arguments with historical facts. As a culminating activity, we display all the memorials in a room and invite other classes to look at the work and jot down comments and questions. Everyone is asked to remain silent as he or she wanders around. Any comments have to be written on sticky notes and placed next to a memorial. It gives my students a



real-life reason for understanding history and why memorials exist.
(David Gribben)

- **Book covers for *Night*:** After a writing-intensive study of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, I have students work in a different medium to sum up some of what they feel and understand about the book. They create book covers that include quotes from their reading logs and from the book, as well as images and color. The resulting cover has to capture the mood and tone of the book, as well as the student's experiences reading it. After they finish, we write process pieces and respond to each other's work. The students are all engaged, and most are forced to look back at the book for specifics, thus reviewing the book again for themselves. (Linus Gintoff)

- **Art as a primary source:** When my history students have finished the Middle Ages and the focus of our next unit is the changes in Europe between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, I take them to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We compare Medieval and Renaissance art by looking at painting, sculpture, and objects I have selected in advance. Students are guided by colleagues through the museum, take notes on what they see, and use them to record evidence of changes in European society between the two eras. Students then work in pairs to find evidence for a thesis statement I give them that describes one change. When we return, partners make posters of one work of art and use it as evidence to support their thesis. After that, students use each other's art work/evidence to write a DBQ essay. History comes alive for these students, and they understand how art can reflect the changes in a society. (Maia Sheppard)

- **Character collage:** I use collage when I teach a graduate seminar for middle-school ELA teaching fellows. We read a young adult book like Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty*, and I ask students to choose a character and create a collage that represents the character. Then we put them up on the wall and make a game of guessing which character each person is representing. After we guess, the artists explain the symbols they've used in relation to the character. I've also used collage with an eighth-grade class that created collages representing themselves. They had to write an accompanying essay that explained the significance of the symbols they used. (Amanda Gulla)

- **Neighborhood collage:** Giving students rich examples to work from makes for much richer student work. I see this in my school with a collage project that comes from Romare Bearden's *The Block*, the book he and Langston Hughes collaborated on about neighborhoods using Bearden's panels and Hughes's poetry. A literature teacher I work with has the art teacher spend classroom time with her students talking about Bearden's collages and collage technique, then helping them get started making "practice panels" with glued-on images over paint on paper. These are then combined into one wall-sized collage/



composition in the hallway. Students then paint their “block” panels with acrylic on masonite boards, again gluing images on top, along with poems and memoirs about their neighborhoods they have written to accompany their panels. (*Margaret Fiore*)

• **Tips for using collage:** Collage is a terrific medium for expression. When done well, they are deep pieces of work, but they can often be somewhat thin. I have seen exceptional collages and thin ones. The kids know the difference. Some tips I’ve used:

1. A piece of writing needs to accompany the collage. This is the writer/artist’s opportunity to explain some of the symbolism of the visual. This also helps focus the students on why they are including certain things.
2. I ask for a minimum amount of materials/media. I have asked students to include words, images, photos, cloth; to write over pictures; to layer the collage.
3. I think, as with all work, we can’t just assign a collage and hope that students do the work at home and well. We need to make classroom time and have some materials available in class. During class after initial draft/ideas about the collage, I’d definitely introduce juxtaposition as an important component. Why do you place pieces where you place them? What are your determining factors?
4. There is also the opportunity to write a journal reflection mid-way through the project on the choices the students made. Also, what didn’t they use?

(*Ed Osterman*)

TECHNOLOGY

As computers have entered every aspect of our lives, over the years of our listserv we have returned again and again to how to use them meaningfully in the classroom. How do we support our students in gaining traditional literacy skills as well as these new digital literacy skills? How do we teach them to “read” the Web? How does this new medium change the nature of classroom discussion? Writing Project teachers are especially aware of the range of linguistic discourses that our students need to be able to negotiate. Supporting their “digital literacy” has meant, for many of us, giving our students opportunities to do the same kind of expressive writing and “writing to learn” we have always encouraged with pen and paper – but now on computer bulletin boards, in chat rooms, and on e-mail as well. From there, we begin to move toward helping them take this “e-expressive” writing toward more formal writing.

• **Discussion boards as forums:** I use the on-line discussion forum Nicenet.org with my students for journal writing,



curriculum-related writing, and research through the link sharing mode. Sometimes the writing is freewriting; other times students have previously written on a topic. They use the discussion board to delete things that they don't want to be public and edit things that don't sound right. Students respond to each other and I use this as an opportunity to respond to them as well. I've discovered that the interaction between the students in this forum has a valuable carry-over back in the classroom. There is more camaraderie, and students show a willingness to work together.

What does the writing look and sound like? I make it very clear to students and others who might have access to the work on Nicenet that this work is informal writing and generally unrevised. Paul Allison, the Writing Project's technology liaison, gave me the good advice to state clearly my expectations of being respectful of the writing of others. I want students reading, thinking, writing, and responding. This forum has worked well for me. *(Sally O'Connell)*

• **Using Nicenet to respond to literature:** I use Nicenet with my literature classes reading Elie Wiesel's *Night*. They write expressively about what they are thinking while reading the first forty pages and while watching two videos on the Holocaust. The students write from their hearts and then respond to each other. What impresses me is the way some students bring up questions they might not have brought up in class: Why did the Germans hate the Jews? Why didn't anyone do anything to stop the concentration camps? I see the value of using the discussion forum as allowing students to raise questions. Perhaps these will be the subjects of their own research. There is genuine communication among the students; I think they like the fact that everyone reads their response, that their writing has an audience. *(Peggy Maslow)*

• **Publishing student work:** I use a site that posts student work to put up my students' best efforts. This site has a discussion board where students or any visitor who registers can comment. I can also control this board and remove unwanted comments. *(Peggy Maslow)*

• **Transforming a lecture:** I use the rolling lab to do Internet lessons on things I might previously have lectured on, such as a recent lesson on Shakespeare's theatre. Using an image-rich Internet site I showed my students images – mostly architectural drawings, Shakespearean-era sketches, and photographs of the reconstructed Globe Theatre. It really hooked students' interest. *(Nigel Pugh)*

• **Creating a webpage:** I created an inquiry into *Macbeth* by asking students to make a webpage. Here are some of the instructions I gave them:

1. Inquiry Task: Create your own webpage answering one question



on *Macbeth* that you choose.

2. Requirements: Work by yourself or in a group of no more than 3 students from the same class.
3. Type the original lines from *Macbeth*, using part of a scene or one scene minimum.
4. Explain the meaning of these lines fully.
5. Show how these lines answer the question you or your group will use.
6. Memorize these lines and speak them before the class and into a digital video camera. (You can choose to use parts of the digital tape on your webpage.)
7. Design the page in an attractive way that will also enhance the answer to the question and help other students to understand the play.

(Peggy Maslow)



RESPONDING TO DIFFICULT CURRENT EVENTS

WRITING AND REFLECTING ABOUT 9/11 AND BEYOND

Less than 24 hours after the planes first hit the towers on 9/11, many of us were already on the listserv asking each other for advice on getting through the teaching days that would follow. Some of our answers are below. Though these entries were written specifically in response to the events of 9/11, like all the ideas in this book, they could be adapted to help your students grapple with and respond to any difficult event from “real life.”

- ***The day after:*** (Written on 9/12/01) Yesterday, when the trains were finally up and running again, I traveled with a group of teachers from one of my schools. As we left the Bronx for Manhattan, we talked about how we could best respond to students in the days to come. We spoke about the fact that perhaps we need to set aside our planned curriculum for a day or more, depending on what our students need, and let these events be the curriculum. We talked about making a lot of space for writing and sharing.

This is a place to begin to create our writing and thinking communities in classrooms. I encouraged teachers to write with their students and share their responses, too, even if they are highly emotional. We want to watch for many things as we take on the awesome responsibility of helping our students and each other to gain some kind of perspective, make some sense of events that seem so grievously senseless. We want to watch out for grief of such magnitude that it might be better handled by counselors in the building. We also want to watch for highly nationalistic or prejudicial responses, like the woman (a stranger) who was crying on the train, as was I, and who then turned to me and said, “I want to tear down the mosque in my neighborhood.” I quietly told her that we couldn’t respond that way, that we couldn’t blame, judge or associate innocent people with a horrific crime because they happen to wear a veil or worship in the same way as those who may be using holy war to justify their actions. (Especially since we don’t know yet who the responsible parties are, or with what organizations they’re affiliated. We have only suspicions at this point.) She actually turned to me and said, “You’re right, you’re right, I know. It was just a first reaction.”

If students respond in such a way, it’s a good opportunity to let other students respond to them...to see where your kids’ sentiments are about these issues. But it’s also a time when you can share your values, too, as a strong voice in the classroom community.

(Julie Conason)





• **Message in a bottle:** (Written for the one-year anniversary of 9/11): I asked my Lehman College students to write their recollections of Sept. 11, 2001. On Wednesday we will go to the memorial services on the college campus and then we'll read our recollections aloud. Then my students will go off and find a place to put their recollection – someplace where someone else may discover it sooner...or later. Like the message in the bottle, someone may just pull down a book about Coleridge in 2010 (if there still are books around) and find a recollection. I also told those who feel bold to bring some tape and put them up around the campus. They can be anonymous or not. Perhaps people will be inspired to put up their own recollections. Who knows? Maybe the campus will be covered in writings. So if you're around Lehman, you may just stumble upon a piece of paper. Be sure to pick it up and read it. (*Mary Carroll*)

• **Safe space:** I still remember the day we returned after Kennedy's death my first year of teaching. Somehow I had the presence of mind to ask students to write about what they'd want to remember to tell their children, because I had a feeling that they *would* want to remember. The main point is that each teacher needs to do what's appropriate for his or her class – but how can you know what that is until you find out what's on their minds? I think of all the times in recent memory where writing and talk have helped students – the murder of another student, the Happy Land fire in the Bronx– and I trust that teachers here will give their students the safe space they need. (*Barbara Martz*)

• **Silence:** Maybe this is said too late. And maybe I don't need to say this because it will happen, or you will do this, regardless. Let there be room for silence. Not filling the void with words and writing and lessons and shape. To be in the void together. At Bard with our students and each other we would do "Quaker Readings" – letting the silence be there, letting the voices emerge when they chose, letting the content be shaped by the speaker. (*Elaine Avidon*)

• **A simple structure:** I decided that well-structured talk was what students needed today. I used a simple structure that I learned several years ago:

1. Sitting in a circle and passing an object... (Today, I had a small furry stuffed animal). Only the one with the object can talk ... all of us go around and describe "one thing you did in the past 24 hours that makes you feel good about yourself." Then ask each to address this question: "What does this show about you? What does it show you can do or are good at?" These affirmations are important, especially now. I ask ALL students to participate in the first round.
2. In a second round, students are invited (but not required) to "talk about an upset that you are experiencing personally."

The follow-up question for this one is to ask students to “identify the emotions they are having. What are you feeling?”

3. When a student talks about an upset, I invite students who have had similar feelings to tell what has happened to them, and what that made them feel. We all avoid giving advice or trying to make the upset go away. (This step was painfully easy today.)
4. A fourth step, when appropriate, and after some conversation, is to ask students to begin to ask the upset person what they might do to change something. This step came into play when some students expressed a desire to “Kill them all” and other anti-Muslim comments, with Muslim students in class talking about how “uncomfortable” they have been feeling.

All of this is as clean a structure as I can imagine. At least with these ninth and tenth graders, they just needed a safe structure within which to pour their horror, sadness, anger, guilt (at having the wrong reactions), rage, sorrow, confusion. And I think they learned more by seeing these emotions in me, too. *(Paul Allison)*

- **Facts and feelings:** With both my sixth and eighth graders, we, too, sat in a circle and talked. The first go-round was “What are the facts?” and the second go-round was “What are the feelings?” It was useful to sort out some of the information and misinformation and then wonderful to share feelings. Different groups of kids took it in different directions, and we took our cues from them. *(Grace Raffaele)*

- **Design a monument:** I am thinking of asking my advisory to take the role of those who may, in the future, be charged with designing a monument to the incident. What seems important? How can a monument or symbol honor all of the interested or affected parties? What symbols work? How would they be funded? *(Grace Raffaele)*

- **Teaching units:** I spent today with a team of folks at my school planning what we will do tomorrow. We designed a one-hour unit for each subject that teachers are free to use, modify or ignore. One has to do with truth and rumor – both how you distinguish one from the other and the dangers of acting on unsubstantiated rumor. Another has to do with team building and diversity. (We have a sizeable Afghani population in the neighborhood and in the school). A third deals with the “logic” of the attack. We’ll ask why those targets were selected and try to place NYC in a global context. The math teachers are being asked to do some work on the “figures” of the tragedy – for example to brainstorm the economic consequences and to put calculations into the story. The science teachers are being asked to do some work on how the buildings collapsed as they did. English teachers might like to have students write a letter to a specific person, for example, one of the hijack victims, someone trapped on a top floor, the child of a missing parent, a firefighter, etc. Each unit contains



brainstorming, writing, sharing, discussion and a concluding activity.
(Nigel Pugh)

- **“Five Sonnets”**: There is a poem many of us have taught by Jack Agueros called “Five Sonnets for the Happy Land Social Club Fire.” (It is actually one poem, separated into five sections, each of which focuses on a different facet of the tragedy, from a book called *Sonnets from the Puerto Rican*.) Perhaps we could use this model and have kids look at the myriad kinds of impact of the WTC tragedy from different perspectives. This may help people to feel validated or to find a place to speak who have previously felt muted, perhaps because their own tragedies are not as enormous as those of others. It may provide a place where a writer can pour out the impact the event has had on his or her family, neighborhood, community, business, or soul.
(Alysoun Roach)



GLOSSARY

Many entries in this book use terms to describe pedagogical practices that we hope are commonly known to most teachers. A few of these terms, however, marked with an asterisk in the text, suggest techniques or structures that may require a fuller definition. These are described below.

- **Double-entry notes:** A tool for “writing to learn” with specific content, double-entry notes help students engage actively with subject matter to make meaning. In double-entry notes, the page is divided in half: one side is used to record information, and the other side is used to note one’s reactions, thought processes, and questions about that information. As a learner takes notes and then reacts to them, the two columns can begin to act almost as a “conversation with oneself.” Double-entry notes can be used to study any kind of content, whether a novel, film, scientific data, textbook chapter, or primary source historical document.

- **Freewriting:** Freewriting is non-stop, stream-of-consciousness writing that is designed to help writers develop fluency. Many teachers use the technique to loosen up students who think they “have nothing to say,” who are intimidated by a blank page, or who lack confidence in their writing for any reason.

- **Gallery walk:** A gallery walk invites students to look closely at a range of material on a single topic that is displayed gallery-style on the walls and other spaces of a classroom. They promote critical literacy by engaging students in multiple, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives through the words, images and sounds of a particular time and place. To create a gallery walk, gather a broad range of print and visual materials that all relate to the same topic – for example, the Harlem Renaissance, World War II, or Shakespearean theatre. You might include photographs, quotations, poems, maps, graphs, charts, short stories, essays, cartoons, primary source documents, music, paintings, editorials, newspaper or magazine articles, film, or video clips. These can be displayed around the classroom in “stations” or in other kinds of thematic groupings, or can merely be scattered around the space. Student visitors to the gallery can read, view, listen to, and observe what is there while taking notes, jotting responses, raising questions, or identifying themes or threads. Students might be asked to do further writing after a period of observation by choosing one item from the walls to describe, by responding to specific prompts, or by generating a list of questions about what they have experienced.

- **Mapping:** Drawing is one of the earliest forms of composition we use. Children draw to hold on to important people, events, and objects in their lives, and to relive and symbolize these experiences. The Writing Project uses the technique of mapping in much the same



way: to help students record, remember, or explore a text, a lesson, a theme, or an aspect of their own lives. Often considered a prewriting activity, mapping can help students begin to define and structure their thinking in preparation for composing to come. Maps can be autobiographical, such as a map of one's childhood neighborhood created as a precursor to writing a memoir. Mapping can also be done in response to curriculum, such as a map of a character's journey, an historical event, or the components of an issue or dilemma.

- **The One-Pager:** The one-pager is a reader-response activity in which students do a series of activities that are designed to illustrate quickly and visually their responses to and understanding of a text. Done on one page of paper, this activity traditionally consists of three parts: a visual representation of something in the text; two quotations related to the visual representation; and two questions the reader would like to ask the author. Teachers can also substitute or add other activities, such as short point-of-view paragraphs or other kinds of writing. (Activity from *Stories from Response-Centered Classrooms* (1995) by Livdahl, Smart, Wallman, Herbert, Geiger, and Anderson.)

- **Point-of-view writing:** Whether inventing a "ghost chapter" a novelist never wrote, rewriting *Beowulf* in rap, or imagining how you'd feel as a soldier going off to war, playing with point of view can be a very powerful way to immerse yourself in a topic. Often in English and history classes, we limit student writing about books and events to a kind of dry content analysis or summary. Point-of-view writing can achieve some of the same goals, but can engage students more deeply. To enter a text through another point of view, Writing Project teachers sometimes simply assign students to try writing in the voice and through the perspective of a person or character different from the "speaker" in an original text. Thus, a novel's events could be retold by a character who is not the narrator, or an event narrated in a history textbook could be told from the perspective of an invented or actual eyewitness. But playing with point of view can also mean playing with the genre, time period, or written style of a text, so that the story of *Beowulf* can be narrated in contemporary language through rap, or the characters of a novel can be reimagined as if they were living in our world today. All of these are ways for students to imaginatively enter the world of a literary work or time period and make it theirs.

- **Text-on-text:** Text-on-text (also sometimes known as "inkshedding") is a way of bringing individual readers together to write about their thinking about a particular text as they read it. To begin, put students into small groups and give each member of the group a copy of the same text taped onto a larger blank sheet of newsprint. Students then read the texts, and write their individual reactions, questions, or opinions of it onto the large newsprint. Next, each person



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