



## Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District

### Instructional Office Newsletter

## How to Get Students to Actually Read a Teacher's Essay Comments

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, high-school teacher Kristy Loudon says it was incredibly disheartening when students looked at the grade on papers she'd carefully annotated and either tossed their paper away or consigned it to the depths of a backpack. "Wow, glad I put so much time into that assignment," was Loudon's *sotto voce* reaction. "Not only did I feel like I had wasted my time; I felt like they just didn't care. And then the snowball of thoughts would start: How will they survive if they don't care about feedback? What's going to happen in college? Or when they get jobs?" She confesses that this often led her to put off reading students' papers for days at a time.

After nine years of suffering through this unproductive dynamic, Loudon stumbled upon a process that has worked remarkably well for her:

💡 • **Step 1:** *Return students' essays with feedback but no grades.* When she reads essays, Loudon writes detailed comments (either on paper or within Google Classroom submissions), but she records the grades separately on a hard copy of the rubric and holds onto it. "The simple act of delaying the grade means that students had to think about their writing," says Loudon, "... and digest my comments, which allowed them to better recognize what they did well or not so well." One student said, "Mrs. Loudon, you're a genius. I've never read what a teacher writes on my essay before, but now I have to."

💡 • **Step 2:** *Have students evaluate their own essays.* Students are directed to (a) read over their whole essay; (b) write three observations on what they did well and not so well; (c) read the  
(Continued on page 2)

## December 2017

## Volume 5, Issue #5

### IMPORTANT DATES

#### December 7-

National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day

#### December 12-

Hanukkah begins at sundown- December 20<sup>th</sup>.

#### December 21-

Winter Solstice begins at 11:28am

#### December 23-January 1

Holiday Break

#### December 25-

Christmas

#### December 26 – January 1, 2018

Kwanzaa

#### December 31-

New Year's Eve

### IMPORTANT NOTICE:

Central office is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

**D**ue to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.



Thank you very much for your cooperation!





(Continued from page 1)

teacher's comments and write two follow-up questions – how to improve the essay, what to do differently, etc.; **(d)** use the rubric to grade the essay; and **(e)** be prepared to discuss all this with the teacher. Louden gives students time for these steps and walks around monitoring their work, which is usually silent and intense.



• **Step 3:** Conference briefly with each student.

The class should have independent reading or work so the teacher can have a 2-3-minute conversation with each student. Louden starts off by asking, "What do you want to talk about?" and students say things like, "I can't believe I did ----" or "I'm sorry I turned it in like this" or "You specifically told us not to do this." She finds it helpful to have these conferences at a large whiteboard-painted table so students can spread out their work and laptops and she can jot comments and planning ideas on the table. "The level of reflection is deeper than any I've ever encountered," says Louden. "I assure them that it is fine and I don't expect perfection, but on the inside I'm so excited that they're seeing the things I see."



• **Step 4:** Compare the student's and the teacher's grades. Louden finishes each conference by asking students how they scored themselves on the rubric and puts their assessment side by side with hers. Often, students are harder on themselves than she was, and they're much more receptive to the grading process than they were with the previous system.



• **Step 5:** Have students revise. Louden gives students time to work on 1-3 further drafts, checking in with them on what they've done and any questions they have.

Louden says this is the most significant change she's made in her teaching in years and she's very pleased with the results: "Students have become more reflective (and sympathetic of how long it takes me to grade – haha!), their writing has improved, and I return papers much more quickly – and happily – than ever before."

**"Delaying the Grade: How to Get Students to Read Feedback"** by Kristy Louden in *The Cult of Pedagogy*, June 4, 2017,  
<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/delayed-grade/>

## SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING

### WRITING WELL

In this English Journal article, Illinois high-school teacher Nicole Boudreau Smith asks why decades of attempts to improve the way writing is taught have sparked so little change. Are schools inherently resistant to innovation? Do teachers shy away from theory? Are schools of education to blame? Or have the advocates of change been so strident in their criticisms of competing approaches that teachers turn away and continue with business as usual? "[R]igid partisanship is extremely problematic, even counterproductive," says Smith. "People change when they interact with thinkers other than themselves, but teachers won't change at all if the rhetoric of tribalism isolates them rather than unites."

Scanning research over the last 60 years, Smith developed a list of seven pointers for teaching writing – precepts that, she says, have "begun to transform my classroom space."



• **Teachers should emphasize process over product.** Students benefit most "when

experiencing the entirety of the writing process, from planning and creating to revising and editing," says Smith. She believes that lecturing to students about writing is not a good use of classroom time; rather, the time spent actually writing and getting feedback at each stage must be maximized.



• **Writers need strategies, not formulas.**

Rigid models like the five-paragraph essay are much less helpful than strategies and heuristics, which give students flexible, transferable tools for taking charge of their writing, solving problems, and overcoming challenges.



• **Writers need scaffolded teaching, not generic instruction.** It's important for teachers

to get to know their students and orchestrate activities and lessons that appeal to their passions and concerns and match their developmental level. It's also helpful to vary pedagogy appropriately – for example, a unit on argumentative writing is handled quite differently from one on memoirs.



• **Writers benefit from authorization, not suppression.** Teachers need to give students a

series of tasks that help facilitate skill development, then step back and let students take the lead. For





example, Smith and a colleague got students working on a simulated intervention with a group of (fictionalized) third graders who were being treated as outsiders; then students conducted the simulation over two class periods and wrote essays on what they'd learned about the causes and consequences of marginalization.



### • **Writers need social interaction, not passive compliance.**

The worst-case scenario is teacher-dominated instruction with students acting as “silent, grim-faced stenographers,” says Smith. It’s especially tempting for teachers to become the “sage on the stage” when working with challenging texts. Teachers need to be intentional about orchestrating lessons where students are challenged to figure things out for themselves and the classroom is “buzzing with social engagement; as students discuss ideas, they push each other to higher levels of cognition... as students talk through their writing with others, they come to realizations they couldn’t achieve on their own.” For example, reading Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Smith got students thinking about several essential questions:

- Does the play suggest that absolute power corrupts absolutely, or that power brings about more good than evil?
- Do the characters love for selfish, or selfless, reasons?
- Is it possible in this play to distinguish the heroes from the monsters?

“These debates occupied one week of class time,” says Smith, “but the opportunity for students to engage in substantive talk like this proved immeasurable in terms of its impact on their growth as writers.”



### • **Students need to write for an audience other than their teacher.**

When Smith’s students finish a major essay, she has them spend an entire period clustered in small groups reading their work aloud to one another and responding with questions, challenges, praise, and suggested revisions. “While I could have ‘saved’ a day of instruction by collecting and reviewing the papers myself,” says Smith, “the power of hearing their peers’ comments – many of these comments more demanding and insightful than the comments I would eventually make myself – created an exigency that students were far more eager to respond to than the earnestly scribbled marginalia of their instructor.”



### • **Writers need reflection, not coverage.**

Smith has to resist the pressure to move on and cover the curriculum without properly processing each unit. “Reflection helps students monitor their own thinking, become conscious of their processes, and apply these processes to other situations,” she says. Students need to think about what they did, how they did it, and why it worked (or didn’t). “We hope that all students leave our classrooms with an enhanced level of wisdom about their choices as writers,” Smith concludes, “and that this wisdom translates, ultimately, into greater proficiency...”

**“A PRINCIPLED REVOLUTION IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING” BY NICOLE BOUDREAU SMITH IN ENGLISH JOURNAL, MAY 2017 (VOL. 106, #5, P. 70-75),**

[http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/EJ/1065\\_may2017/EJ1065Principled.pdf](http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/EJ/1065_may2017/EJ1065Principled.pdf)

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## Should We Continue Teaching the Literary Canon?

In this article in *Literacy Today*, consultant Emily Chiariello weighs the pros and cons of teaching literary “classics” in secondary schools, often including *The Great Gatsby*, *Hamlet*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Julius Caesar*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Macbeth*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What are the arguments for continuing to teach these and other “great books”?



- ✚ They have beautiful prose, timeless themes, and simpatico characters.
- ✚ Students can learn about a time other than their own and gain a deeper understanding of the current era.
- ✚ The syntax and idiomatic expressions may be unfamiliar, but teachers can use archaic usage to help students understand how language changes over time.
- ✚ If students aren’t familiar with the classics, they won’t understand allusions in everyday discourse. “All one has to do is keep track for a day or two of how many times a character,







story, or author is referred to from a classic text in a news story, in another published work, or in passing conversation,” says Hoyt Phillips at Teaching Tolerance. “Without a knowledge of these references, students run the risk of not being able to fully participate in these conversations.”

- ✚ This is especially important for marginalized students, who need “cultural literacy” to navigate successfully in the U.S.
- ✚ Finally, there’s inertia: teachers have well-developed lesson plans on the classics that they’ve been comfortable using for years.

What are the arguments against the canon?

- There are plenty of contemporary works of literature that are just as worthy and much more relevant to today’s students – for example, *The Kite Runner*, *Life of Pi*, *Unwind*, *The Hunger Games*.



“Students need and demand relevance,” says Phillips. “Teaching classic texts at the expense of more current texts can further alienate students, thus causing them to disengage.”



- Are the themes in the classics really universal, or do they stem from a narrow slice of history and culture? The literary canon is Eurocentric, male-dominated, and heteronormative, “grounded in systems of oppression that have established educational goals and environments with very narrow identity groups in mind,” says diversity consultant Sara Wicht.
- Is the instructional time spent struggling to understand classics’ archaic language worth it? Does this lead to teachers reading for students?
- Isn’t this time especially unproductive for English language learners, who need every minute to become proficient in contemporary English?
- The messages embedded in the classics are all around us – in the media, churches, the legal system, and other institutions – so isn’t reading them in classic literature redundant?
- Some of today’s literature may be classics in 100 years. Students should be thinking about the criteria for being in the canon and getting a jump on tomorrow’s selections.

Chiariello believes there’s a middle ground: “In terms

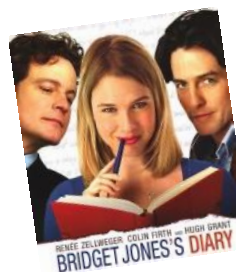
of cultural literacy,” she says, “it can both be true that the classics are lacking in diversity and that a basic understanding of such texts is required in a balanced education.” Atlanta teacher Darnell Fine agrees: “Much of students’ survival, in particular students of color from low-income backgrounds, depends on their ability to navigate worlds that push them to the margins. By not teaching them about the culture of power, it makes it harder for students to gain power and control over their own lives.”

The best compromise may be the “windows and mirrors” approach to selecting works of literature: some books should reflect students’ culture and experiences while others provide windows into unknown worlds that broaden their cultural and literary horizons. “Multicultural reading lists aren’t about displacing classic works of literature from the canon,” says Fine, “but making room for marginalized voices and authors that have been routinely excluded from the core curriculum.” Here are Chiariello’s suggestions for rethinking literary selections:

- **Prune the classics list.** Keep the works that do the best job of fulfilling learning objectives and discard those that don’t. For example, for a curriculum unit on the dystopian genre, are the traditional texts like *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World*, and *1984* really the best, or might *Diverse Energies*, an anthology of dystopian short stories, be more effective?

- **Use excerpts.** Close reading of well-chosen passages from texts (for example, on loyalty or foreshadowing) can accomplish as much as reading the whole text, leaving room for more variety in the curriculum. The anti-bias curriculum *Perspectives for a Diverse America* <http://perspectives.tolerance.org> has more than 300 texts from a variety of sources.

- **Teach students to be literary and media critics.** As they read and view, students should ask, Whose voice is privileged and whose is missing? What stereotypes are reinforced?



- **Compare texts.** Students might study similarities and differences between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *The Odyssey* and *Summer of the Mariposas*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Speak*, and *Romeo and Juliet* and *Romiette and Julio*.

- **Read with a different lens.** For example,





students might read *To Kill a Mockingbird* with an eye to how the African-American characters respond to the unfolding events.



- **Integrate other media.** Teachers might use film, music, visual art, podcasts, and social media to introduce, supplement, and reinforce literary themes. The Book Riot website has lots of ideas: <http://bookriot.com>

- **Connect literature with current events.** For example, *The Outsiders* has links to gang violence, *Macbeth* to the recent unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. The Learning Network at The New York Times suggests dozens of text-to-text connections between the news and works of literature: [https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/about-the-learning-network/?\\_r=0](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/about-the-learning-network/?_r=0)

**“A CLASSIC DEBATE” BY EMILY CHIARIELLO IN LITERACY TODAY, MAY/JUNE 2017 (VOL. 34, #6, P. 26-29), no e-link;** Chiariello can be reached at [emily.chiariello@gmail.com](mailto:emily.chiariello@gmail.com).

## Getting Struggling Students to Read a Lot

In this article in *Literacy Today*, Mamaroneck, New York administrator Annie Ward says that with below-par readers, “we often diagnose deficits and prescribe highly specialized treatments without attending to the basic, proven remedy: a good book and time to read it.” Of course some students need more-intensive interventions, but “We must ensure first, foremost, and forever that striving readers have abundant daily access to compelling books, appealing choice of reading material, and copious time to read in school and at home for reading success.” Some specific steps:

- **Access** – Even in seemingly well-supplied schools, some students are in de facto “book deserts.” Teachers, librarians, and school leaders need to audit classroom libraries to make sure they cater to a wide range of interests and reading levels. It’s also important that all students have daily access to a well-stocked school library and take home books for long weekends and summer vacations with few strings attached. “If students have trouble finding titles, free up the librarian to ‘book whisper,’” says Ward. “Above all, make sure borrowing privileges are not revoked if

they don’t return books. This harsh policy eliminates access and disproportionately harms students in poverty.”

- **Choice** – “It’s a law of human nature that we lean into what we have selected for ourselves,” says Ward. “Not only does text choice increase motivation, but it also builds agency and efficacy.” Teachers should notice the choices students are making and use them to locate other texts and beef up library and classroom collections. Choice is especially important for struggling readers who need ready access to a wide variety of fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels, and series books at their levels. Intervention teachers should have short, engaging texts at their fingertips for practice and enjoyment.

- **Time** – “Schedule and hold sacred a substantial block of time for independent reading each day,” says Ward. This might be 30 minutes first thing in the morning, a schoolwide DEAR time later in the day, or a long block for reading and conferring following each mini-lesson. To maximize the chance of students reading a lot at home, schools should consider reducing or eliminating worksheets and other homework and making independent reading the main event.

**“THREE COMPONENTS TO READING SUCCESS” BY ANNIE WARD IN LITERACY TODAY, MAY/JUNE 2017 (VOL. 34, #6, P. 10-11), no e-link;** Ward can be reached at [award@mamkschools.org](mailto:award@mamkschools.org).

## Improving Middle-School Students’ Motivation to Read

In this Teachers College Record article, Margaret Troyer (Harvard University) reports on her study of inner-city seventh graders’ reading motivation, a key factor in comprehension and achievement. Using test results, surveys, and interviews, Troyer created **four motivation profiles** and closely observed two students in each category in their classrooms.

1. **Average achievement, high motivation** – These students did fairly well on tests and were strong on self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, belief in the importance of reading, and independent reading, and were in the average range on classroom





compliance. The two focus students were most motivated by grades, keeping track of how much various class assignments and tests counted. One of the focus students was an avid reader, the other read very little on her own.

#### 2. **High achievement, average motivation** –

These students scored well on tests but were much lower than the first group on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, belief in the importance of reading, compliance, and the amount they read on their own, and they were more apt to avoid reading. One of the focus students said he always listened to the teacher and followed along, but Troyer observed him walking around the classroom socializing and teasing classmates. The other focus student read ahead of the class and made her own notations in texts, but almost never engaged in recreational reading after school hours. Both were very motivated by grades.

3. **Low achievement, low motivation** – These students scored poorly on tests and were low in all the profile categories except for recreational reading on digital devices. Teachers said the two profile students lacked skills and motivation and sometimes caused discipline problems, for example, throwing a pencil at another student. Both students blamed the difficulty of classroom texts or confusing questions for their lack of success as readers, and neither did much reading outside of class.

#### 4. **Average achievement, low motivation** –

These students were low in self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, belief in the importance of reading, were average on compliance and recreational reading, and scored well above average on avoidance. The two focus students were the only ones in the study who said they weren't that concerned with grades; they showed some impatience with test-prep activities and the tests themselves. Both reported enjoying specific books; one found *A Long Way Gone* "dramatic" and "crazy" while the other read *Of Mice and Men* and said the treatment of Lenny "makes me sick inside." One of the students said she had read a lot when she went to school in Jamaica but was now intensely self-conscious about her accent when asked to read aloud in class.

Analyzing these four profiles, Troyer was struck by the fact that low motivation didn't necessarily translate to low test scores, and also by variation within the categories as revealed by watching and

interviewing the profile students. She had several other observations on these classrooms and how teachers did and didn't motivate students to read:

- **The perverse impact of the IRE dynamic** –

In classroom discussions, teachers almost always followed the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate pattern, posing questions that had a single correct answer and quickly affirming or correcting students' responses. Although two of the teachers in the study said they were philosophically committed to encouraging students to take risks, says Troyer, "in my observations, both were brusque in acknowledging correct or incorrect answers, and more importantly, they did not acknowledge that some questions, particularly in literary analysis, have more than one possible right answer. This instructional practice seemed to be reflected in students' statements about the importance of getting the right answer, and their apparent belief in their ability to get this answer as a sign of their cognitive ability."

- **The effect of round-robin reading** –

Many teachers' use of turn-taking oral reading in class inadvertently conveyed the idea that good readers are those who can read aloud "without, you know, stopping all the time," said one student. "Like not too slow and not too fast," said another. "I try not to mess up on words too much," said a third. For the girl from Jamaica who worried about her accent, oral reading seemed to have totally turned her off reading.

- **Tracking out-of-class reading** –

The teachers in the study knew how important it was for their students to read a lot, but they didn't systematically gather data on how much kids were reading on their own. Some of the focus students were, in fact, reading a lot, but their teachers weren't the key factor. What all the students needed was (a) class time for independent reading, (b) access to high-interest books, and (c) adult support in text selection.

- **Compliant pretenders** –

Teachers mostly believed students were motivated and successful if they were well-behaved the followed directions; as one teacher put it, "she just does what you ask her to do and there's never any pushback." Troyer found that teachers often didn't recognize high levels of interest and motivation because the students were less manageable behaviorally.

- **Text selection** –

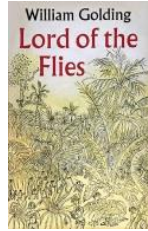
Students were assigned quite different texts by different teachers – some read







classics like *Of Mice and Men* and *Lord of the Flies* while others read high-interest young adult novels like *Make Lemonade* and *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Interestingly, Troyer's surveys and interviews didn't find a big difference in students' perceptions of the two types of texts.



Troyer says teachers "could benefit from gathering more information about students' reading motivation, beyond observations of work completion and class participation – and that teachers should continue to gather such information over the course of days and weeks, paying close attention to the contexts within which students are motivated to read, rather than relying on a single static measure." The best way to get such information, she says, acknowledging how busy middle-school teachers are, is through brief informal conversations. She also believes teachers need to tune in to the context and texts that motivate individual students, working to build intrinsic motivation (as opposed to focusing on grades) by nurturing students' autonomy (through choice of texts), competence (through in-class success), and relatedness (through a wide selection of relevant texts). "Ideally," says Troyer, "teachers might expand students' ability to self-select texts, and provide them with support in choosing texts which are relevant and in using talk about those texts to engage with peers and adults." In addition, she has the following suggestions:

- **De-emphasize oral reading in front of the whole class;**
- **Move away from the IRE discussion dynamic; instead, prompt students to give extended answers.**
- **Don't convey the idea that there's one right answer and that "smart" students answer quickly.**
- **Keep track of what students are reading outside of class;**
- **Don't judge students' motivation by their behavior in class;**
- **Provide students with a rich variety of texts.**
- **Continuously work on building relationships with students.**

**"A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF ADOLESCENTS' MOTIVATION TO READ" BY MARGARET TROYER IN TEACHERS COLLEGE RECORD, MAY 2017 (VOL. 119, #5, P. 1-48), available for purchase at**

<http://en.buaa.findplus.cn/?h=articles&db=a9h&an=122716887>

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## Six Principles for Teaching Writing

In this article in *American Educator*, Judith Hochman (The Writing Revolution) and Natalie Wexler (an education journalist) report that on national tests, only 25 percent of U.S. students are writing at the proficient level. This is a problem, they say, since expository writing "is essential for success in school and the workplace. Students who can't write at a competent level struggle in college. With the advent of e-mail and the Internet, an increasing number of jobs require solid writing skills... No matter what path students choose in life, the ability to communicate their thoughts in writing in a way that others can easily understand is crucial."



How did we get to this sad state of affairs? Hochman and Wexler blame a mindset about how writing should be taught – the idea that if students read enough, they'll pick up writing skills by osmosis, and that teaching grammar and syntax will improve students' prose. "But writing is the hardest thing we ask students to do," they say, "and the evidence is clear that very few students become good writers on their own. Many students – even at the college level – have difficulty constructing a coherent sentence, let alone a fluid, cohesive essay." Teachers have been told to show their students models of good writing and have them emulate them, or describe the elements of a good paragraph or essay. "But for many students, that's not enough," say Hoffman and Wexler. "For them, the techniques of good writing are a secret code they just can't crack."

The solution, they say, is to teach writing systematically from K to 12 and not let students' problems pile up to the point where middle- and high-school teachers are confronted by "page after page of incoherent, error-riddled writing" and don't know where to begin. Writing instruction needs to be broken down into manageable chunks that students practice repeatedly, at the same time as they are





learning content. For students to get better, say Hochman and Wexler, “they need a series of strategies that specifically target the skills they haven’t yet mastered, while building on the skills they already have, in a gradual, step-by-step process. They also need clear, direct feedback that helps them identify their mistakes and monitor their progress.”

The authors describe the woeful state of one student’s writing when she arrived at New Dorp High School on Staten Island in New York City. Asked to write an essay on Alexander the Great, she managed six simple sentences, one of which made no sense. An actual essay, the ninth grader said, “wasn’t going to happen. It was like, well, I got a sentence down. What now?” Teachers at New Dorp went to work



implementing six principles of writing instruction, and by this special-needs student’s junior year, she was writing coherent essays, scoring well on state Regents exams, and planning to apply for college. Here are the principles

(described in more detail in Hoffman’s and Wexler’s forthcoming book, *The Writing Revolution*, Jossey-Bass, August 2017):

- **Explicit instruction starting young** – Being a good reader is not enough to become a good writer; writing requires far more decisions. And students who can speak fluently don’t necessarily transfer that to coherent writing. Students need to be taught how the conventions of written language differ from those of spoken language, communicating with much more precision and clarity, anticipating what the reader needs to know and understand, and using punctuation and key words (despite, although, for example, specifically) to indicate nuances in meaning, connections, and breaks in the narrative. It’s also important that they avoid errors in spelling and grammar that will distract readers. All this needs to begin in the early elementary grades, and although it’s important that students enjoy writing and get to use it as a means of self-expression, there should be plenty of explicit instruction, practice, and feedback to hone skills.

- **Sentences as the building blocks** – “In many schools, the quantity of writing has long been valued over its quality,” say Hochman and Wexler. “The Common Core and other standards have only increased the pressure on teachers to assign essay-length writing. But if students haven’t learned how to

write an effective sentence, that is where instruction needs to begin.” Students need to do plenty of sentence-level writing in which they explain, paraphrase, or summarize sophisticated content, use correct spelling and grammar, and get feedback on form and content. Then they can move on to paragraphs and essays.

- **Writing embedded in curriculum content** –

To maximize the benefits of writing instruction, say Hochman and Wexler, teachers need to go beyond personal narrative assignments like arguing the pros and cons of school uniforms and speculating on what it’s like to be famous. “Having students write about topics unrelated to content represents a huge wasted opportunity to boost their learning,” they say. “Writing isn’t merely a skill; it’s also a powerful teaching tool.” Students should be asked to write about ancient Egypt, tornadoes and hurricanes, *Jane Eyre*, and other subjects they’re studying. And all teachers should see themselves as teachers of writing, even if it’s only a 5-15-minute do-now activity, check for understanding, or exit ticket.

- **Curriculum content as a driver of writing rigor** – Hochman and Wexler suggest writing activities that build writing skills and get students thinking deeply about subject matter. One sentence-level exercise is for students to complete a sentence stem adding because, but, and so. Here are examples from three subject areas at different grade levels:



--Rocket learned to read because/but/so

--Fractions are like decimals because/but/so

--Aerobic respiration is similar to anaerobic respiration because/but/so

“No matter what content you use with these kinds of activities,” say the authors, “the specificity of the prompts makes them far more powerful than an open-ended question such as, ‘Why did Rocket learn to read?’” In a science class, students at New Dorp High School were asked to write three sentences about hydrogen and oxygen, starting with Although, Unless, and If. Here’s what one student came up with: Although hydrogen is explosive and oxygen supports







combustion, a compound of them puts out fires. Unless hydrogen and oxygen form a compound, they are explosive and dangerous.

If hydrogen and oxygen form a compound, they lose their original properties of being explosive and supporting combustion.

This was the student who was unable to write more than six simple sentences as a ninth grader.



- **Grammar taught in the context of writing** –

“Research has consistently found that teaching grammar rules in isolation doesn’t work,” say Hochman and Wexler. For many students, learning parts of speech and diagramming sentences just adds to the confusion, takes up valuable cognitive real estate, and doesn’t carry over to their own writing. “But that doesn’t mean teachers can’t, or shouldn’t, teach grammar,” continue the authors. “What does work is to teach writing conventions and grammar in the context of students’ own writing.” One particularly helpful exercise is sentence combining, which students find engaging and gets at many of the same skills as dry grammar instruction.

- **Planning and revising** – “Although experienced writers may be able to turn out a well-developed paragraph or essay on the fly,” say Hochman and Wexler, “most of the students we work with find it overwhelming to organize their thoughts at the same time they’re choosing words and figuring out the best way to structure their sentences.” A planning template helps students think through the main idea or theme, the points they will make, and the order in which they will make them. This helps them think through what additional information they need, connect ideas or claims with relevant details or evidence, and avoids irrelevant information and repetition. Having jotted this outline, writing a first draft is quite straightforward. Then comes revising, which is where students apply what they’ve learned in sentence-level exercises to insert transition words, vary sentence structure, and use subordinating conjunctions, appositives, and other techniques so the writing flows and makes sense.

“ONE SENTENCE AT A TIME” BY JUDITH HOCHMAN AND NATALIE WEXLER IN *AMERICAN EDUCATOR*, SUMMER 2017 (VOL. 41, #2, P. 30-37, 43),  
<https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2017/hochman-wexler>

Hochman can be reached at [info@thewritingrevolution.org](mailto:info@thewritingrevolution.org). See Marshall Memo 454, article #3 (a “classic”) for a description of the Hochman/Wexler approach to teaching writing at New Dorp High School.

## Helping Students Fix Common Errors in Text-Based Writing

“Supporting upper-elementary students’ higher-level thinking about text in their writing is difficult,” say Elaine Wang (RAND Corporation) and Lindsay Clare Matsumura and Richard Correnti (University of Pittsburgh) in this article in *The Reading Teacher*. “It requires teachers to have a clear understanding of the thinking demands of the writing assignment and to pay close attention to the quality of students’ thinking.” The authors identify some common missteps that students make as they respond to texts and suggest how teachers might respond:

- **Analysis of literary elements** – The goal is for students to construct new ideas about setting, character, etc. that aren’t explicitly stated in the text:

- **Misstep:** Students summarize individual elements without showing how they relate.
- **Feedback:** Press students to explicitly articulate cause-and-effect relationships.
- **Feedback:** Remind students to use linking words and phrases – because, makes, affects.
- **Misstep:** Students get sidetracked by alluring details and don’t focus on a larger idea.
- **Feedback:** Redirect students to consider bigger ideas and messages in the text.
- **Feedback:** Encourage students to consider how elements change and develop and how this affects the text.



- **Comparing and contrasting** – The goal is to break down a subject into its constituent parts and show how they relate to each other.

- **Misstep:** Students focus on superficial rather than nuanced similarities and differences.
- **Feedback:** Direct students to consider larger ideas in the text or the discipline.
- **Feedback:** Help students recognize similarities within apparent differences and distinguish





differences among seemingly similar things.

- **Misstep:** Students treat topics of comparison separately.
- **Feedback:** Suggest that students reorganize their writing by “slicing” rather than “chunking” points of comparison in order to highlight similarities and differences.

• **Interpreting theme** – The goal is to synthesize discrete events or details into a coherent, generally applicable (and often abstract) statement about life.

- **Misstep:** Identifying the topic rather than articulating a full statement of theme.
- **Feedback:** Ask questions that prompt students to make an observation or claim about the topic – “What is the author saying about courage?”
- **Misstep:** Summarizing the text rather than discussing theme.
- **Feedback:** Provide a series of questions that guide students to identify a theme statement, which unpacks the statement in a logical way.
- **Misstep:** Using clichés
- **Feedback:** Encourage students to be more specific.
- **Feedback:** Guide students to delineate the big concept more by thinking of specific subtypes or contexts – for example, with a clichéd description of love, ask whether it’s romantic love, sibling love, parent-child love, or friendship.

“WRITTEN FEEDBACK TO SUPPORT STUDENTS’ HIGHER-LEVEL THINKING ABOUT TEXTS IN WRITING” BY ELAINE WANG, LINDSAY CLARE MATSUMURA, AND RICHARD CORRENTI IN *THE READING TEACHER*, JULY/ AUGUST 2017 (VOL. 71, #1, P. 101-107),

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1584/abstract>

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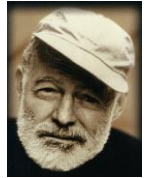
## Getting Good Writing from Middle-School Students

In this article in *AMLE Magazine*, teacher/author Dominic Carrillo describes how he gets high-quality writing from his middle-school students:

- **An authentic audience** – Carrillo has found

that students are highly motivated by publishing their letters, essays, or short books online, potentially read by thousands. Students are skeptical at first, but not after Carrillo shows them samples from previous classes. One student wrote an open letter to anyone contemplating suicide and heard back from a young woman who said the letter helped her decide not to take her own life. Carrillo’s most recent project was having students choose an influential public figure and write him or her a persuasive letter. “The idea was that if Donald Trump or Miley Cyrus didn’t actually read their letters,” says Carrillo, “then at least an online audience would get the message.”

- **Wide reading** – Students start by reading models of effective writing in the genre they’ve chosen: for short stories, Hemingway, Chekhov, Shirley Jackson; for memoirs, Stephen King, Maya Angelou, Malala, and Malcolm X. Carrillo also has students look at writing by students in previous years and his own published writing (he’s the author of a young adult novel). Students spend several days taking a critical look at these exemplars, discussing story elements, the author’s voice, theme, intention, characters, organization, and any other applicable Common Core standards. Some key questions: How will reading this make my writing better? Which author will I use as a model? What will my voice, theme, and organization be? How will it come across to my audience?



- **Imperfect first drafts** – “I recommend dedicating a full class period to discussing bad first drafts,” says Carrillo. He opens by asking students to pair-share about what makes writing so difficult and then has them read an Anne Lamott essay on terrible first drafts (it contains some profanity and might need to be redacted). Students grasp that being a good writer is not an innate gift, their writing won’t be perfect at first, all writing benefits from criticism, and they need to stop overthinking and put pen to paper.

- **Helpful feedback** – Once students have produced first drafts, Carrillo has them sit in a large circle and establishes what Ron Berger calls a “culture of critique.” General feedback (“Good story, I liked it”) isn’t helpful. Nor is rude and hurtful feedback (“Boring” “That sucked”). To model helpful, specific comments, Carrillo shows a six-minute video about a first grader’s efforts to draw a





butterfly, “Critique and Feedback, The Story of Austin’s Butterfly”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOSiU42P8Gc>

“Ultimately,” says Carrillo, “students see the value of quality feedback and are ready to critique knowing that the end goal is to create excellent, publishable writing... Whole-class peer critique goes from being a dreaded and uncomfortable idea to a purposeful and valued part of the process.” Over two or more class periods, students read their writing aloud (or have the teacher read anonymous submissions) and classmates offer comments and suggestions.

- **The peer editing funnel** – A guiding principle that Carrillo learned early in his teaching career was, **Never read a student’s first draft**. Before the teacher sees student writing, it should be edited and refined based on peer feedback and reflection:

- **The whole-class workshop described above deals with the holistic problems by posing questions like: *Is the piece clear? Does it make sense? What’s the intention? Is it effective? What’s missing? What needs to be cut?***

- **Peer editing and revision** – Working in pairs, students use a checklist to give detailed feedback on each other’s writing.

- **Gallery walk** – Students’ writing is printed out and posted around the room and each student is asked to pick one piece to scan for final edits and quick fixes and then, on cue, move to another.

- **Create a Google doc** – All students’ final writing is loaded into a single online document that peer editors can access to make small finishing touches. This also allows the teacher to monitor the writing and make formative comments and suggestions.



- **Put early finishers to work** – Carrillo gives students who complete their writing ahead of their classmates a leadership role in the publishing process: chief editor, an editing team member, formatter, cover designer, event manager, or lead marketer for a school library unveiling, book sharing event, or student exhibition. Students who take on this role need to master the chosen publishing platform, for example, CreateSpace, Lulu, Blurb.

By the end of this process, he says, “students are usually impressed with how much their writing has

improved through revision and editing – and most of it they’ve done through effective peer collaboration...

I won’t pretend that every student ends up loving the writing process, but they definitely walk away respecting it, and have learned new strategies along the way.”



**“AUTHENTIC AUDIENCE, WONDERFUL WRITING” BY DOMINIC CARRILLO IN AMLE MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 2017 (VOL. 5, #4, P. 25-28), no free e-link; Carrillo is at [dominicvcarrillo@gmail.com](mailto:dominicvcarrillo@gmail.com).**

## FIFTEEN WEBSITES WITH LEVELED TEXTS

In their book, **MAKING TEACHER EVALUATION WORK: A GUIDE FOR LITERACY TEACHERS AND LEADERS** (HEINEMANN 2017), RACHAEL GABRIEL AND SARAH WOULFIN list online sites that provide leveled reading texts:

1. **New York Times Kids Blog:**  
<https://www.nytimes.com/section/learning>
2. **Tween Tribune:** <https://www.tweentribune.com/>
3. **Epic Books:** <https://www.getepic.com/>
4. **Kids Discover:**  
<http://www.kidsdiscover.com/quick-reads/>
5. **Common Lit:** <https://www.commonlit.org/>
6. **ReadWorks:** <https://www.readworks.org/>
7. **Starfall:** <http://www.starfall.com/n/level-c/index/play.htm?f>
8. **Breaking News English:**  
<https://breakingnewsenglish.com/>
9. **For the Teachers:**  
[http://www.fortheteachers.org/reading\\_skills/](http://www.fortheteachers.org/reading_skills/)
10. **ThinkCERCA:** <https://thinkcerca.com/>
11. **NewsELA:** <https://newsela.com/>
12. **News in Levels:** <https://www.newsinlevels.com/>
13. **Unite for Literacy:**  
<http://www.uniteforliteracy.com/>
14. **Bookbox:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/user/bookboxinc>
15. **Center for the Study of Adult Literacy:**  
<http://csal.gsu.edu/content/are-you-learner>

**MAKING TEACHER EVALUATION WORK: A GUIDE FOR LITERACY TEACHERS AND LEADERS (HEINEMANN 2017), RACHAEL GABRIEL AND SARAH WOULFIN (APPENDIX 3F, P. 127)**

