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Not So Far Away

Not so far away from here
in another galaxy, reached
through a hidden passageway
in the undiscovered blackhole
of an ancient star imploded
fifty million years ago,
there is a pear-shaped planet
not so unlike our own —
though it has no air,
or trees, or water, or light,
and where exist creatures
not so unlike ourselves,
though they have no hearts,
or lungs, or eyes, or brains,
but who understand the meaning
of life and death and eternity
but do not express this truth
because they have no language
and no desire to share.
Perhaps we should zip and zag
through millions of light years
of space to capture them
and break their silent code,
instead of beating our heads
against brick walls trying
to shape words on paper
or in the air in some pattern
that crudely unmask even
the coarsest nugget of wisdom
about the simplest mysteries.
The Night Dylan Thomas Died
Two-fisted Welsh boys grip stones
cold and round as moons, pause in their hunt
for wolves in the primeval forest
of the neighborhood park, stand rigid, stare
at the sky expecting meteors or the moon to fall.
Then sense something strange unfolding
in that cold, early winter night.

Old uncles nap in front of the fire, stir in their sleep,
emit deep guttural grunts, refold thick hands
across their waistcoats and recapture slumber.
Frail aunts flit like wrens from chair to window,
filled with anxious stirrings that something is not
quite right. A log tumbles ghostlike in the hearth.
The cottage groans against the chilled night.

Arctic winds drop from Iceland,
churn white sea-caps on the purple sea.
Howling waves crash against coast-rocks,
promising cold so severe that woolly-mammoths
return, walk twice around the town,
then huff great puffs of ghostly vapors and vanish,
leaving only their huge oval tracks in the snow.
Stray dogs howl as though high-pitched whistles,
blown by errant school boys, pierced their ears.

Humpbacked whales roll in the icy sea,
spout their own rhymes with aery moans
and keening cries. Brindle foxes awaken
in snug lairs, yap three times at the gibbous moon,
then curl feathery tails around them like woolly scarves,
and return to sleep. Owls abandon field mice,
hoot softly, swoop like fallen angels,
and move off to roost still hungry.

Corduroy blokes in a London pub
clink stout glasses, mumble drunken toasts,
and rekindle tall stories about the night
Dy Thomas drank eighteen whiskeys,
then crawled home on hands and knees,
and was back at the bar at ten in the morning.
Somewhere a widow pounds her head against the wall,
blasphemes God for taking him away,
spends the night in straight-jacket sorrow.

Young boy, barely old enough to print his name,
wraps stubby fingers around a gnawed pencil
and scrawls boldly: My yellow cat has a yellow hat.
Then boasts proudly, “Mother, look what I have done.
I made my very own poem.”
Smelling The Coffee

Authored by Gary Jones,
Sister Bay, WI

Once again an almost-empty pot left on the heating unit
Filled the faculty room with the scent of burnt coffee—
A Prustian tea-sniff (coffee-sniff?)
That takes me back to my freshman year of college
When the prospect of an impending exam or term paper
deadline
Would drive me to the coffee machine in the dorm basement:
Insert a quarter, and from the bowels of the vendor
Dribbled an instant paper cup of coffee.

As I didn’t drink coffee then,
I assumed that the beverage was supposed to taste nasty and
burned,
As if gnomes had been boiling it down like tree sap over an
open fire in the woods.

many are the things in life we approach as sage sophomores
With grimacing sips —
Until an Ann Landers admonishes us to wake up and smell the
coffee.
“My tear ducts are too near my kidneys,” smiled Mrs. T. Cheeks tear-dribbled as once again she was touched by something someone had said or done.

Maybe tear ducts settle with age,
Like bellies, bosoms, and eye bags,
Nearing the kidneys, as Mrs. T. noted.

Now that I am on the downhill side of my teaching career,
Tears flow more freely:
My students singing (chubby Kelly at the microphone,
eyes clinched, belting out a pop tune)
An unexpected essay (Jason wishing his mother were still alive and his brothers and sisters living together)
Watching a play with English classes (the end of Death of a Salesman makes me disgusting because my nose runs, I tell them, so I can’t sit near them. “How are you holding up?” they grin at the end of the first act.)

Mrs. T. died last year.

And as I recall Hopkins’ fatherly advice to Margaret,
I know why the tears come so easily to my eyes.

An unexpected essay ...
Jason wishing his mother were still alive and his brothers and sisters still living together
"Grammar is that science which makes known the nature and structure of speech, and immediately concerns the correct and elegant use of language, while it surpasses all the conceptions of the stupid and unlearned, and presents nothing that can seem desirable to the sensual and grovelling, has an intrinsic dignity which highly commends it to all persons of sense and taste, and makes it a most favorite with the most gifted minds."

1851 the Grammar of the English Grammars.

Goold Brown

For years the prescriptive approach of grammar was assumed to create better writers. The back to the basics teachers stressed the use of traditional grammar as a means to an end. The end being a finished, written product. A finished written product that was grammatically perfect. The grade was often determined by the number of spelling mistakes, punctuation errors, sentence fragments, and a variety of other mechanical problems.

To further complicate the matter, textbook companies each year tend to revise their books to cover new material which in essence is a rehashing of old material under new titles, definitions, or terms. If they could agree on common terms and proper usage, all teachers would have a basic language to communicate with. Textbooks perpetuate confusion to what is right or acceptable.

Next, because educational systems give grades, tests are given and graded in an unnatural way. The grammar is taught and tested in units, segments, bits and pieces, and not as part of the whole process. If every sentence in one paragraph began with I, the "I" would be marked. If every sentence in a paragraph contained a compound subject and an infinitive, the paragraph would be marked lack of variety also. Yet this is the way we tend to teach grammar. Prior to 1900, in a study by Dora V. Smith, language in American schools centered around a continuous study of grammatical
components. The premise was that the study of the parts of grammar improved mental discipline and correctness in speech and writing. Up to 1900, there was no evidence available indicating that a technical knowledge of grammar was useful in speaking or writing.

Studies concerned with the relationship between grammar and composition skills by Franklyn Hoyt in 1906 and Thomas H. Briggs in 1913 indicated that the study of grammar has little relationship to a student’s skills in composition. (R.W. Reising p105-106)

A 1917 study found a weak relationship between grammar and composition. The result prompted a movement toward functional grammar. As a result, there was an effort to teach grammar geared toward effective speaking and writing. This resulted in the development of ability groups in the 1920-30’s. The low ability groups took longer to cover the same material at the expense of other phases of English. (Meade, p173)

Teacher attitude and education is another roadblock in effective writing. The traditional teacher is secure with a textbook in hand. A tried and true book that advocates the teaching of grammar and writing as two separate units. The textbook company provides reassuring tests, ditto masters, and plenty of exercises. The exercises are most important as sixty repetitions of a single grammar problem would surely cause some retention which would be carried over into the writing process. This was not true. The following may be closer to the truth.

There’s a sort of low moan that goes up periodically from the English departments of colleges and universities across the country over the fact that most students, even the good ones, can’t write a lick...

Teacher attitude and education is another roadblock in effective writing. The traditional teacher is secure with a textbook in hand.

The author, a writer, imagines he is teaching a college class. However, his class could be any low level English class.

Good morning, children, and brace yourselves. This is Writing One-A. I want to subtitle it ‘Writing for those who still sign their name with an X’. No, these kids aren’t stupid or uneducated, just writing impaired. I love that. Makes you sound like Helen Keller at the pump, waiting for a miracle. It’s not entirely your fault, though; I know that. There isn’t one in a thousand teachers who know the first damn thing about writing. All your lives, they’ve been reducing it to widgets and screws, clauses and semicolons for you, till what you think you’re working with is a dainty sort of parlor art, something like embroidery.

(Vetter, p43)


Two axioms of teaching English underlie the theory and practice of this book. These are:

a. Students learn to write by the actual processes of writing: that is, putting words together for the purposes of communication. No amount of time given to grammar teaching, usage, drill, or other instruction in the mechanics of composition will teach the skill of writing.
b. The reason for teaching grammar is to improve written sentence structure.

Consequently, every portion of grammar instruction must be directly related to the process of writing.

(Pooley, p141)

The attitude of considering the whole composition as a basis for the study of grammar is evident in point “a”. This seems to be the roots of the process approach, the student centered and psycholinguistic approach to the study of writing.

Pooley, however, reverts back to the “bits and pieces” approach to grammar in axiom “b” for junior high students. (Pooley, p145) At the senior high level he stresses the practice of the various forms to be used. One example is:

After a number of plain compound sentences have been written and analyzed, set the assignment of adding a dependent element to one part of the compound sentence. When this step has become clear and easy, have the students mark compound sentences with both parts modified by dependent clauses.

(Pooley, p159)

Pooley fell short of taking the final step. The step that would have carried him over into writing and the thinking approach. It is difficult to fault this grammarian because he stopped short on one item when he did so much for the study of grammar and usage.

Other writers of the period began to realize that writing was a process; and the relationship between the study of grammar and writing at the most was marginal.

The bulk of research came after the 1950's. Study after study indicates that the teaching of grammar does not increase the quality of writing. The Harris study concluded, "Al-

though formal grammar classes made significantly higher gains on the grammar test, the study of English grammatical terminology had a negligible or even a relatively harmful effect upon the correctness. In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms...the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing.” (Braddock, p37-38)

The use of time devoted to grammar, which could be better used in writing exercises, is supported by Paul Diederich. He states, “I have to admit that most teachers of composition devote an inordinate amount of time to it. I often suspect that they run away from the problem of teaching and writing and teach grammar instead.” Additional evidence to confirm this statement can be found in most language arts programs. Marshfield Junior High School curriculum for 7th grade states:

Precedent to the skills of paragraph writing are the more fundamental ones, such as the parts of speech, word usage, grammar, sentence structure, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Students practice those skills in a wide range of activities. Occasionally, self-directing and self-correcting activities are assigned. The assignments may range from one-day to five-day assignments. The students are pretested to determine their needs or weaknesses.

Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition (1977) textbook provides the essential core content of instruction since the students have corresponding copies of this text. Some correlated activities come from the Skills Practice Book, a workbook published by McDougal, Littell and Company (1982)
and some supplemental, mimeographed copies of exercises that come from the Building English Skills (1982) provide the additional reinforcement of the fundamental skills.

Approximately three-quarters of the academic year will be spent in the instruction of the objective, which should prepare the students with grade-level skills.

Having learned the skills, the students should be able to:

1. Write sentences with simple subjects.
2. Write original sentences with nouns as objects or prepositions.
3. Write original sentences with nouns as direct objects.
4. Write original sentences with nouns as indirect objects.
5. Write original sentences with nouns as predicate nouns.
6. Classify nouns as singular or plural.
7. Identify pronouns.
8. Write original sentences with pronouns as antecedents.
9. Write original sentences with demonstrative pronouns.
10. Write original sentences.
11. Write original sentences with indefinite pronouns.
12. Write original sentences with reflexive pronouns.
13. Write original sentences with adjectives.
14. Write original sentences with predicate adjectives.
15. Define and identify adverbs.
16. Write original sentences with adverbs.
17. Identify the three kinds of verbs.
18. Identify the function of each kind of verb.
19. Write original sentences with each kind of verb.
20. Define and identify prepositions.
21. Identify the structure of prepositional phrases.
22. Recognize functions of prepositional phrases.
23. Write original sentences with two kinds of prepositional phrases.
24. Identify interjections.
25. Identify subjects and verbs.
26. Write original sentences with proper number agreement between subject and verb.
27. Identify 7th grade sentence patterns and fragments.
28. Write original sentences with various sentence patterns.
29. Use contractions and their homonyms correctly.
30. Make proper use of grade-level punctuation marks.
31. Make proper use of grade-level capital letters.

The final quarter of the year is then divided into writing. The philosophy states: “the ultimate goal is to help the student become a more effective writer, a more effective speaker, and a more effective student through the study of grammar, speech and composition”. (Diederich p81) (Marshfield Junior High School Course Work In Writing At The Regular Track, 1984)

James Moffett also states, “What has been definitely proven so far...is that parsing and diagramming of sentences, memorizing the nomenclature and definitions of parts of speech, and otherwise learning the concepts of traditional, classificatory grammar or of structural, slot and substitution grammar do not reduce errors. When correctness is the goal, these studies show, an incidental and individual approach to errors is more effective.” (Moffett p165)

This individual approach on which Moffett based his theories has influenced all that have followed. They all believe that grammar should be taught...but not as a method to improve writing. Writing is a process that employs motor and thinking skills and that students can understand the skills of grammar if taught within the writing process.

The child can better understand a skill when...it is taught within the context of the writing process. He can learn quotation marks in the first grade if there is conversation in his piece...Calkins’ preliminary data shows that children who received punctuation in context used over twice as many punctuation forms in their texts as children who received them in isolated exercises.

(Graves, p161)
Peter Elbow also feels that grammar should be taught within the context of the writing process. In the chapter “The Last Step; Grammar” he indicates that unless you have an expert secretary or a patient friend who proofread well, you will probably want to learn grammar. To learn what you don’t know Elbow suggests keeping a notebook. "Each time you revise a piece of writing, pick a few of the mistakes that were the most troublesome...especially ones you repeated. Just pick four or five. Don’t try to learn everything at once. For those few errors, try to understand why you made them and what the rule is for getting them right." (Elbow, p170-172) He continues to suggest that this book be used as a resource for future writings.

One author, Robert de Beaugrande, did try to present a case in defense of grammar. He stated:

I feel teaching grammar, though it doesn’t have a very good record in the past, can be both helpful and effective on one condition. At present, most textbooks and lesson plans offer what deserves to be called a 'teacher’s grammar'. English textbooks are not written for learners so much as for other English teachers, who—please remember—decide which book the learners have to buy.

(Beaugrande p. 66-69)

James Moffett would agree with the uselessness of textbooks and workbooks. His student centered theory stresses that you start each student at whatever level he is on and develop his skills from that point.

It is easy to support a point of view on a given subject by neglecting to choose articles and books by people who disagree with the basic premise of this paper. Every argument for teaching grammar as a means to improve writing was weak in its presentation of statistical information. The authors that have presented their views are the current leaders in the reform of the writing programs. Donald Murray summarizes the general feeling of educators in the field of English.

As the student writes a sentence and reads that sentence back...an unavoidable and necessary part of the writing process...the student is involved with the question of grammar. As the student’s paper is read by the instructor in conference and the classmate in workshop, as it is understood or misunderstood, the issue of language is involved. We cannot teach writing without teaching grammar.

Few composition teachers find that the teaching of grammar in advance of writing does much good. For most students the principles of grammar are abstractions meaningless until the students are in the process of using language to discover their own meaning. At that time they become meaningful—pun intended—tools of thought. I’ve often had students who do very well in our grammar courses who cannot write well. They know the principles, but they do not know how to apply them to evolving drafts; they know the tools, but they do not know how to use them. We should know the traditions of our language, but they are best learned within the context of making writing. (Murray, p238-239)

Study after study tried to prove a positive relationship between the study of grammar and some aspect of writing.

In the view of widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (Braddock, p37-38)
Black Bag Exercise

"Perfect for a lead-in to a how-to paper or a section on technical writing."

Authored by Mary M. Bendel-Simso, Madison, WI

A good exercise for a day when final drafts are due and you can’t count on your students to prepare anything else for class—and it takes no preparation beyond finding a blindfold/scarf and collecting in a bag various everyday objects, the use of which is somewhat complex (e.g. a can opener, dental floss, a bottle of bubbles, a box of matches, a deck of cards [to shuffle], a yo-yo, a back scratcher, chop sticks...). The exercise is designed as a lead-in to a “How to” paper and works best following a discussion of technical writing.

Break your class into small groups (of approximately four students—I always use their roundtable groups) and give them this scenario:

Two aliens have landed. They’ve found some Earth objects they can’t identify. You must write a description of what they are and how to use them. The only problem is that the man of this species is born without eyes and the woman has no arms (i.e. she can read him the directions but he can’t see what he’s doing). They speak English, but have a limited vocabulary—they’re great with adjectives (e.g. they know “counter-clockwise”), but are weak on nouns (e.g. they don’t know “cap,” as of a bottle).

Have each group draw an item out of the bag and write up instructions. (I recommend that each group keeps their item to themselves.) Before they begin, remind them that the more specific the directions—and the greater the number of simple steps in the directions—the easier they will be to follow.

Once the groups have completed their instructions, pull the class together. Ask for volunteers to act out the roles of the alien couple. Blindfold the one student and give him or her an object (other than the one he or she described). After (or while) the couple attempts to accomplish the task, get the class to critique how successful the directions were (e.g. did they tell them how to pick up and orient the object for the next instruction? did they drop all the matches on the floor pushing the little box out of the holder? did they tell them to re-dip the bubble wand if there is no soap film over the circle?)

The Black Bag Exercise is fun and a welcome break from the routine of introductory composition. It is also an incredibly convincing (and often humorous) concrete example of the need for specifics and the need to say precisely what you mean—after all, we can’t follow our writing around telling our readers “that’s not what I meant” when they do precisely what we instructed.

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James Boswell, Hester Thrale Piozzi, Dr. Johnson, and the Canon

As a student in the early and mid-1970's, when no one to my knowledge used the terms "canonical" and "non canonical" to describe the authors studied in undergraduate survey courses of eighteenth-century prose and poetry, I studied Dryden, Swift, Pope, Addison and Steele, Boswell, Johnson, Goldsmith, and Gray. No women writers were included. In survey courses devoted to the novel, I read Fanny Burney's *Evelina* and Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. However, these works were usually passed off as minor developments, of secondary interest only. No one stopped to wonder particularly, as we do today, why the novel seemed to be so much the province of women writers during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In general, looking back on my experiences as a graduate student, I often felt left out, irritated because I couldn't understand or share my professors' reverence for the venerable male writers. It seems to me now that I was an intruder in an old boys' club, an attempt to recreate the virile intellectualism of the Johnson-Boswell circle and of Swift and Pope's Scriblerus Club.

I was reminded of these long-buried feelings of inadequacy and rejection when I taught my first survey course in the eighteenth-century British novel. We were trudging wearily through *Tristram Shandy*. One of the women in the class complained of the insensitivity and callousness of Walter Shandy, Uncle Toby, and Dr. Slop, who converse about trivialities, albeit learned trivialities, while poor Mrs. Shandy is upstairs trying to give birth to Tristram. The class decided that, for them, reading *Tristram Shandy* was a lot like the role played by Mrs. Shandy in the novel. Like most twentieth-century college students, she does not understand Latin, and she has no first-hand experience of war, as Uncle Toby does. She is, therefore, excluded from the conversations that constitute such an important part of the novel. Actually, she doesn't seem to care; she is too busy, first trying to give birth and then running her household and caring for the infant Tristram.

As we continued to struggle through *Tristram*, I asked the students to write down their reactions to the book. One student wrote:
After all the nail-biting frustration, I’m glad there was no second volume. I’m still at a loss as to why this book is a classic. I must be a lot dumber than I think I am. If this book is taught in a class like this, it must be worthwhile, but for the life of me I can’t see why.

Another student wrote, “I feel confused and lost now. At the beginning of the semester I probably would have dropped the course if I had to read Tristram Shandy first.” When we finally finished the novel, my students were just about as amused by the whole experience as Mrs. Shandy must have been when she heard Yorick’s explanation of the point of the story:

‘L—d! said my mother, what is all this story about? — A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick—And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.

Granted, Tristram Shandy is an extremely difficult novel, by anyone’s standards. The sense of frustration and exclusion that it prompts in students, however, is not unique. Swift, Pope, and Johnson can be intimidating to students who are not familiar with literary allusions and formal structures based on classical models. Thus, the eighteenth-century specialist who finally gets the chance to teach his or her beloved authors runs into resistance from students. This problem is sometimes compounded by students’ difficulties with what appear to them to be incomprehensibly sexist and racist attitudes expressed in the literature.

Opening up the canon to include women and minority writers, however, does not necessarily make literature more accessible to students. As Gerald Graff has argued, for many students, questions of what to include in the canon are ultimately of no interest; they need instead more elementary preparation in how to participate fully in any academic discussion of literature, whether canonical or not. In Graff’s words,

What makes reading and interpretation difficult for many students is not the kind of text being read, whether canonical or non-canonical, highbrow or popular, but the heavily thematic and symbolic ways in which all texts, irrespective of status, are discussed in the academic setting. (The student phrase for it is “looking for hidden meaning.”) (35)

Graff’s point is well taken. All of us struggle with this issue. What do you do with students who insist on preparing plot summaries in lieu of critical analyses of the works discussed? Students who accept or reject a work of literature on the basis of whether or not they approve of how the characters act in certain circumstances? How do we get them away from their literal-minded approach? Even though incorporating women and minority writers into the syllabus will not automatically solve this problem, Graff suggests that explaining to students the source of the controversy over canon can be a good place to start.

In an eighteenth-century survey course, there are many opportunities for using dialogues between canonical and non-canonical writers to help students overcome some of the obstacles presented by unfamiliar texts. In contrast to Sterne, Fielding, Pope, Swift, and Johnson, many eighteenth-century women authors wrote in genres (domestic novels about courtship and a young person’s entrance into the world, for example) that are immediately very accessible to students. Many excellent women authors, including Frances Burney, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Anne Finch, wrote diaries, memoirs, and letters, as well as poetry that is not modeled extensively on classical forms. These works describe everyday life, and their style is often expressive, informal, and immediate; students who are just beginning to study the period often find these works very interesting. Several students in my last class became quite enthusiastic about Frances Burney’s Diaries after they prepared a special presentation about Burney.
Teachers must, of course, always contend with the question: Should accessibility be a criterion in assigning literary worth to a text? Certainly, accessibility isn’t a prerequisite for literary value. However, in the survey course, the incorporation of genres that used to be considered of historical interest only (letters, diaries, journals, sketches) can be an effective way to introduce students to the venerable canonical material. At the same time, there is no longer any need to apologize for including these works, for eighteenth-century specialists have begun to recognize them as major genres.

I would like to present just one example of how expanding the canon to include women authors can enhance and enrich the traditional survey course in eighteenth-century literature. The Johnson-Boswell Circle has always struck me as being particularly appealing to male scholars. Boswell’s reverence for Johnson is infectious, and male Johnsonians, I’ve always suspected, believe themselves to be intellectual descendants of Johnson and his proteges. Johnson, also, said some fairly unkind things about women, such as his very famous quip about women preachers: “Sir, a women’s preaching is like a dog’s walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all” (327). Students encountering Johnson and Boswell for the first time would therefore be very interested to learn that Boswell’s foremost competitor for the honor of writing the definitive biography of Johnson was a woman, Hester Thrale Piozzi. Hester Thrale met Johnson in 1765, and from that time until Johnson’s death, she and Johnson were very close friends. In her diary, Thraliana, she describes Johnson as “my true friend.” After Henry Thrale’s death and her marriage to Gabriel Piozzi (a love match that was viewed as most unseemly by her friends and family), Piozzi wrote Anecdotes of the

Late Samuel Johnson in 1786 and prepared the first edition off Johnson’s letters, published in 1788. Piozzi and Boswell, not surprisingly, were not fond of one another. The literary competition between them was so well known that a pseudonymous “Peter Pindar” published a satirical poem entitled “Bozzy and Piozzi; or, The British Biographers. A Town Ecologue.”

Piozzi presents a Johnson who is in many ways similar to Boswell’s, but her attitude is less reverent. She shows exasperation with his sharp tongue and his eccentricities, and she finds his company tiresome at times. She tells us “he was for the most part an exceedingly bad house companion, as his person drew people’s eyes upon the box, and the loudness of his voice made it difficult for me to hear anybody but himself” (49). Elsewhere she says “He delighted no more in music than painting; he was almost as deaf as he was blind: traveling with Dr. Johnson was for these reasons tiresome enough” (66). Both Piozzi and Boswell recreate Johnson’s pithy, sarcastic conversation. Piozzi, however, often comments on the harshness or tactlessness of the remarks, and attempts to soften any unflattering impressions that they may convey to the reader:

He was for the most part an exceedingly bad playhouse companion ... He delighted no more in music than painting; he was almost as deaf as he was blind: traveling with Dr. Johnson was for these reasons tiresome enough.
If, however, Mr. Johnson lamented, that the nearer he approached to his own times, the more enemies he should make, by telling biographical truths in his Lives of the later Poets, what may I not apprehend, who, if I relate anecdotes of Mr. Johnson, am obliged to repeat expressions of severity and sentences of contempt? Let me at least soften them a little, by saying, that he did not hate the persons he treated with roughness, or despise them whom he drove from him with apparent scorn. He really loved and respected many whom he would not suffer to love him...He was no gentler with myself, or those for whom I had the greatest regard. When I one day lamented the loss of a first cousin killed in America— "Prithee, my dear (said he), have done with canting: how would the world be worse for it, I may ask, if all your relations were at once spitted like larks, and roasted for Presto's supper?" Presto was the dog that lay under the table while we talked.—When we went to Wales together, and spent some time at Sir Robert Cotton's at Lleweny, one day at dinner I meant to please Mr. Johnson particularly with a dish of very young peas. Are they not charming? said I to him, while he was eating them.—"Perhaps (said he) they would be so—to a pig." I only instance these replies, to excuse my mentioning those he made to others. (43)

Notice Piozzi's tact and concern that readers might be offended by Johnson's outspokenness. She is also concerned that readers might condemn her for repeating unpleasant remarks made at others' expense, so she is sure to reassure readers that Johnson was equally harsh and unkind in his conversations with her.

It is well known that there was formerly a rude custom for those who were sailing upon the Thames, to accost each other as they passed in the most abusive language they could invent, generally, however, with as much satirical humour as they were capable of producing. Addison gives a specimen of this ribaldry, in Number 383 of The Spectator, when Sir Roger de Coverly and he are going to Spring-garden. Johnson was once eminently successful in this species of contest; a fellow having attacked him with some coarse railery, Johnson answered him thus, "Sir, your wife, under pretense of keeping a bawdy house, is a receiver of stolen goods." One evening when he and Mr. Burke and Mr. Langton were in company together, and the admirable scolding of Timon of Athens was mentioned, this instance of Johnson's was quoted, and thought to have at least equal excellence. (Life 1780)

As Boswell presents this scene, Johnson's sarcastic remark, complaining that a stranger's wife is so lascivious that she gives away sexual favors, thereby stealing business from hard working prostitutes, is admired for its wit and its "manly" directness (never mind that today such a joke would be considered sexist.) In Boswell's Life, Johnson is an authority figure whom everyone admires and respects. Being put down by Johnson is an honor, as Boswell establishes from the beginning of his account of his friendship with Johnson. Mrs. Piozzi sees the cruelty and tactlessness of Johnson's behavior and apologizes for it.

Boswell, in contrast, usually presents Johnson's harsh remarks as admirable and witty. Johnson is Boswell's beloved mentor, his idolized surrogate father. In Boswell's view, no one can get the better of the brilliant Johnson in intellectual and conversational combat; it is a great honor to be bested by Johnson in conversation, and people who are too sensitive to withstand Johnson's sarcasm do not deserve his companionship in the first place. Boswell presents Johnson's witty and sarcastic remarks as the centerpiece of a conversation among men, as in the following passage:

Being put down by Johnson is an honor, as Boswell establishes from the beginning of his account of his friendship with Johnson.
After reading both Boswell and Piozzi, students come away with a more complete picture of who Johnson was, a clearer grasp of the complexities of the autobiographers' craft, and an appreciation for the contributions of women writers to the literary milieu of late-eighteenth-century Britain. In my survey courses, students will continue to read Pope, Swift, Fielding, Richardson, Johnson and Boswell—but in a new spirit of openness and adventure that will allow us to discuss the limitations imposed upon our understanding of eighteenth-century literature and society when we read only these authors.

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One On One: Read It For Sure, But Who Do You Teach It To?

The book is Sam’s story. He’s a 6’11”, 235 lb. all-state basketball scoring machine; but he’s dyslexic, a virgin, and stutters. An English teacher named Romney helps Sam cope with the dyslexia and the stuttering has diminished, but Sam’s journey into sexuality, though delayed, finally arrives under the tutelage of Deanie. We travel the chapters in Sam’s head, seeing, hearing, feeling, and smelling, his perceptions with vivid power. He’s a full-bodied character: at once complex, mysterious, productive, responsible, and trapped in a passion for Deanie that could challenge reader belief.

We meet her as a foul mouthed misfit who shaves her head, but leaves one leg and both armpits hairy. She wears a ring in her left nostril and a chain rig from there to more rings in her ears. Also count three tattoos on biceps and thigh. Deanie is a composite of Madonna, Joplin, Elvira, and other forms of outrage. Deep in Sam’s character is the need to protect and especially to nurture. He befriends her with coffee, doughnuts, gloves, and protection from a drug selling degenerate named Jason Chapin.

But Sam can’t protect her from parental depravity. The narration unabashedly allows us into Deanie’s daily world where neglect, violence, and sexual abuse by mother and stepfather rip at every resource she can use in self-defense. Her anger and exhibitions are the open wounds of a tormented refugee. Sam, with his own flaws, is the only card Deanie has, though she hates it and at first wickedly spurns him. There’s some compelling psychology in the way Sam and Deanie mutually attract and repel.

Author: Jerald Hauser, Green Bay, WI

A devote of good wine might describe One On One, by Tabitha King, as having ‘good legs,’ but there’s more to it. It has a strong heart, fine mind, and deep soul. It’s an impressive reading adventure for literate adults, but may present problems for teachers wondering what the risks for use with high school and college students might be.

The two central characters, Sam Styles, “Samgod,” and Deanie Gauthier, “The Mutant,” are boy and girl basketball stars at Greenspark Academy in rural Maine. They and a cast of peers, parents, and coaches live through a championship season and various adventures of loyalty, watching your back, and seeking truth, reminiscent of Hoosiers, except that the latter is a more innocent tale of adolescent youth and high school ambiance.
each other. Given the right kind of reading group, some very strong learning, reflection, and discourse opportunities should be available.

Also present are riveting descriptions of school life in corridors, lavatories, gym lockers, and on team buses. The narrative voice is present tense which makes the action very immediate and characters self-conscious.

“Sam is surprised at how tender his navel is; it hurts. Suregod, if it isn’t the barrel of a gun biting his belly button, it’s a goddamn good fake. Close up to Chapin, he can smell the stink of crazed fear coming off J.C. and he can feel the terror in J.C.’s muscles—it doesn’t matter whether it’s terror or toot, the guy is wired with it and might do anything.” (p. 408)

Pranks, violence, drinking, drug sales, and explicit sexuality between Sam and Deanie, may shock parents, who could retort, “This doesn’t go on where my kids go to school!” But how sure can they be about that? Potently crafted and described episodes of all of the above, along with uncensored but truthful dialogue, make the book important literature for adult readers, but problematic for use in classrooms.

“He tries to remember the mechanics as he understands them. Lubrication. The lush crinkle of hair on her pubis seems to part naturally as he rolls his fingertips through it but when he touches the small protuberance of her button directly, she jerks violently. Hastily he lifts his thumb.” (p. 203)

The novel is packed with tough ideas about kids foundering in bewildering and sometimes ugly events. But there’s so much truth and realness throughout and it embodies the ‘coming of age’ genre with such grit and beauty, that use in college courses shouldn’t be dismissed.

The Criterion for English teachers, in a quandry about this novel, or others like it, might rest in their response to the question, how much artistic but explicit writing about sexual discovery can I risk exposing my students to? A compelling question; the kind that might invigorate an entire professional conference.

One On One never allows readers to feel safe. In the final chapter, when you think Sam and Deanie have found a quiet harbor, a shock, lurking in a deserted mill, awaits them.

“Deanie grabs onto the rope convulsively, trying to rise again, but the man’s arms are around her waist, dragging her back down. He is wheezing, squealing a kind of gibberish at her, a secret language made up completely of violent obscenities. Clinging with one hand to the line, Deanie bats at him with the other, claws at him, bucks with her whole body against his embrace.” (p. 479)

And the epilogue, where two teachers talk about those “flamboyant” kids, is wonderfully poignant.

“What happens to them?” the young woman asks. The older teacher shrugs. “Sometimes they grow up together quite successfully,” she says. “You never can tell.” (p. 485)

Tabitha King has written a haunting and muscular ‘coming of age’ novel that should be read by mature book lovers and further puzzled over by teachers of English. It’s one that I’ll give to a friend or two and want returned. Then I’ll read it again.

One On One, by Tabitha King, published in March, 1993, is 485 pages and listed by Dutton as $23.00.

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The Learning of Art; 
the Art of Teaching

As teachers, we benefit our students greatly by learning something we cannot do. This year I learned to draw, an endeavor that enhanced my ability to notice, but more importantly, taught me about the writing classroom.

As an English teacher I knew I had no need to draw, and took pride in my lack of skill. “Now you can enjoy my bad art,” I would comment as I tried to illustrate on the board relative positions of people in a story. And the class smirked, attention at least temporarily secured. I was teaching them writing, not drawing; I had no call, no requirement, no desire to be an artist.

As shown above, the PHOENIX, rising from the ashes of its own nest, is an ancient Egyptian mythological symbol of the revitalization and return of the sun.

But this year, just like the student forced to pass required English in order to graduate with a mechanical degree, I had a motivation. I wrote a manual about teaching, and my heart was set on illustrating it with a phoenix rising from the ashes and a blooming dandelion, both linked in my consciousness to teaching. Alternate avenues to obtaining an illustrator proved unsuccessful: the drawings or lack thereof were up to me.

About this time I also found Betty Edwards’s book Drawing On the Right Side of the Brain, and dubiously read her assurances that anyone can draw as I shuffled, muttering, through its pages. (“I bet she just waited until she had someone already talented in the class and used their work.”) But Betty said anyone could draw. Her claim was ironically not unlike my own to writing classroom students.

I had a motivation. I wrote a manual about teaching, and my heart was set on illustrating it with a phoenix rising from the ashes ...

Author: Holly Schoenecker
As English teachers, we possess an innate belief that everyone can write. From timid ESL students to hardened, slang-spewing pupils, writing is something that will enable language acquisition and increase proficiency. Of course Mordred can write; he's been speaking (admittedly his own version of) English for ten or sixteen or twenty years. Writing is simply sorting the input, deciding on an overall impression, and putting it down on paper. So we give out plans and formulas like the five paragraph theme, or we imitate Donald Graves and coach our students in writing books. We believe their writing will improve. Generally it does.

What of the student who comes to class believing he cannot write, he does badly at it, he has never been any good, the one whose mother put him into auto mechanics as a major? "No, dear," we contradict, "anyone can write."

Suddenly, with my pictureless manuscript in hand, I felt very much like that slouched student, the one sitting in the seat closest to the door.

Still, I bought Betty’s book and began.

The scary on-going process of learning the unknown conferred many benefits, even in its beginning stages, benefits that were revealed not only on the drawing pages, but in teaching, in classroom mien, in comments to students. These were results that made the drawing itself an extra reward.

Learning to do something the learner is convinced he cannot do, like drawing (or writing essays for English class), means taking a lot of seemingly worthless exercises on faith. After three blissful chapters of text, Betty told me to make four pre-instruction drawings. Now I knew how poorly I drew; I did not need a reminder to tack on my wall, or keep at the back of the notebook. And I certainly begrudged the time spent on those drawings. In fact I hurried through two of them: my dedication wore thin (and I was only on chapter three). I wanted to get past this stuff to the real drawing. Why waste time on something I couldn’t do? The little sprite that whispers in ears when its comments are most unnerving murmured something about students who write a
beginning essay in class, "So I can see how each of you write," as the teacher says on the first day. There was an uneasy parallel between Betty's pre-instruction drawings and those long dead themes titled "My Summer Vacation."

Of course I could have hidden the book in my closet, under the stack of volumes waiting to be read, or sprinted ahead to chapter ten. One reason I did not was an overactive conscience. Another was a fear I would not understand Betty's chapter ten. A third was the letter from a public school district in response to a reckless communication of my own requesting purchasing information on my book. So I grumbled under my breath, and twisted in my chair, and lost concentration, and pointed my feet toward the door, and did the drawings (while watching the clock).

The drawings were not good. I thought they should have been, because I did do them even though I wanted to skip that part. I followed Betty's directions, but they were not good. I thought perhaps I could quit drawing lessons, but I did not want to write back to the public school district refusing their purchase.

However things brightened. The next drawing exercise was okay because it was meaningless, and so I did not have to worry about my lack of drawing ability. I also did not have to listen to Betty bubble on about how well some others did, because there were no others on that page. I did have to read the directions several times (I must be stupid, right?) since I was dealing with art, not writing. I missed the sweet feelings of comfort and superiority connected with my own subject. And I resented being a beginner.

After the scanty comfort of that exercise I progressed to copying a drawing upside down, rather like the student fulfilling the requirements for the classic five paragraph essay, that seem so straightforward, so easy, so simple. My picture was a bit skewed, and more than a little out of proportion, rather like some perfect five paragraph essays I remember reading. I also didn't feel very interested in it.

Meanwhile my right brain, which was being encouraged by all this outline drawing and upside down drawing and frustration (according to Betty Edwards) and which was, I thought, already sufficiently trained by winning seasons coaching academic thought teams and finding things in a home where dropping it on the floor is a universal hobby, felt sort of...different. Relaxed. Fluid. Yes, even free.

Betty said this was the right brain taking over, as the left brain gave up. Maybe she did know whereof she was talking. Maybe I decided to give her another chance, since I did not have any other immediate options open.

Unfortunately, when I moved to the next page, Betty had picked out her best students again and tacked their papers on the pages. How could I draw a foot, a hand, a complex organic object, and a hand holding something, when these examples were so perfect? Before Betty I had never even considered spending my afternoon duplicating on paper a foot in a huarache, drawing every strip of leather, every toe wrinkle like the one in her illustration.

Something happened in the right brain with this exercise, though. The left brain had departed for Brazil, or gone to sleep, or given up, waiting resignedly for the new semester's deadlines, when I would resume sanity and begin organizing notes for teaching English again. The hand I drew was good, really, truly good. I sat bathed in
contentment, admiring it, and flexing my model hand to restore circulation. As I reviewed with self-satisfied pleasure the drawn intricacies of my hand’s assorted fingers and wrinkles (The right brain prefers complexity, Betty said.) my husband came home from work. “Why did you draw a hand making an obscene gesture?” he inquired.

Despite his crude (and apt) observation, I was even eager to try the complex organic object. A geranium in a flower pot proved to be an inordinately complex and unfortunate choice. One artistic friend later kindly pointed out that I had gotten the slope of the pot and the scabby flaking along its protruding side accurately. But the flowers were too big on one side and too small on the other, and when I went around the crenelated leaf, the pencil or the leaf needed more space than was left, because the leaf, which sat very well half covering a cluster of buds in the pot, tried to usurp the buds’ space on my paper. I wondered how much I would have to pay someone to draw for me and if I should keep up this activity, because the one picture I did right (and kept unfolding to admire) was obviously a fluke. The sprite at my ear made a few uncomfortable remarks about students who display one burst of beautiful prose on a topic that interests them, and wander disconsolately in the deserts of repeats, wondering how they can repeat, if they can repeat, and why the teacher and they don’t like the repeats.

So I continued.

The hand holding something of assignment twelve was a success; its held flowers stayed in proportion and did not mutate into science fiction creations, the hand stayed unobscene because I was careful in its arrangement. Excitedly I showed this drawing to my family (except my husband who addressed each new phenomenon with, “What are all those papers for, anyway?”). And I continued.

But my teaching of English, so safely locked in the left brain, was not unaffected.

It became more amorphous. It did not lay our directions and goals and results in quite the same way. In one class I had planned and plotted a follow up assignment to a reading: Introduction, Step 1, Step 2, Step 3, Conclusion. Show this. Do that. Follow my procedure.

Yet when it came time, my voice said something else.

“Would you please move into groups?”

“How large?”

“Whatever you think.”

And when they were grouped, “I would like you to take the material we discussed and do something with it. You have twenty minutes, and then we will share your presentations.”

“That is a lot of guidance,” they objected sarcastically.

“I know. Take the material and do something with it.”

Their results were insightful and original, revealing their interpretations of the material, not mine.

All Betty’s results were not in the classroom.

I experienced growth according to Abraham Maslow’s classic definition. We grow, he wrote, when the attractions we see are great and the dangers we see are small; with conditions reversed, we opt for safety (and stasis).
The importance of personal interest in work cannot be overrated ... Neither life nor learning is a spectator sport

The importance of personal interest in work cannot be overrated. When students are involved, whether in drawing or writing, their concern increases the attractiveness of the growth. Choice, control, and personal destiny are significant. Neither life nor learning is a spectator sport.

Saying I understand a student’s difficulties with writing is very different from enduring my own frustrations with the elusive line in art. Similar experiences breed empathy.

The point of learning something new (in addition to the skill and knowledge it brings) is not what we do, but what we remember: this is what it is like to be a learner.

And yes, I did draw the dandelion and the phoenix; the large school district bought their copy of the book I wrote and illustrated.

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Margot Fortunato Galt's *The Story In History* is an ambitious, resourceful, and inspiring book. Unapologetically interdisciplinary in her thinking, Galt, who holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota, combines recent developments in the study and teaching of history and writing to produce a useful, innovative creative writing text/sourcebook for upper-elementary through adult level teachers. This alone would make *The Story In History* successful. But what I find most inspiring here is Galt’s uncompromisingly democratic vision of American history, and her earnest belief in writing as the scene of learning and power.

Though the simmering debate about the New History has cooled somewhat, Galt’s approach to American history is grounded in a theory and method politically conservative readers may find troubling. She argues that “historical acts can be both individual and collective, performed not only by heroes and heroines, but also by the little people.” In Galt’s view, all personal narratives, oral histories, and cultural perspectives are as historically relevant as the stories of big events, great men, and the dominant culture which have traditionally been the focus of American history. (This is, of course, a controversial position. For the past twelve years, conservative forces in Washington D.C. and elsewhere—William Bennett, Lynn Cheney, Allan Bloom, et al.—have rallied against it.) When we view history in this way, its primary sources—the materials historians turn to to recover the past—include not only government records, presidential letters, declarations of war, and so forth, but also less conventional, and, in many cases, more interesting, sources: our own family histories; diaries of women on the Oregon Trail; Sioux oral histories; 1940s advertisements in *Life* magazine, and so forth.

...historical acts can be both individual and collective, performed not only by heroes and heroines, but also by the little people.
More importantly, the act of writing these stories, of introducing social history and popular culture into the grand story of America, is an act that empowers us. We can, as the book’s subtitle urges us, write our way into the American experience. Since the beginning, when Thomas Jefferson and others wrote the United States into existence with the Declaration of Independence, writing has always held such potential. In the Confederacy, for example, laws often forbid slave owners from teaching their slaves to read and write, because slave owners feared that such knowledge would lead their slaves to revolt or escape. As hundreds of written slave narratives testify, the slave owners’ fears were justified: Not only did literacy help lead slaves to self-awareness and freedom, but the stories escaped slaves went on to tell—those of Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs, for instance—empowered them even more. They literally wrote themselves and their people into American history, in their own voices, from their own points of view. The most important thing Galt points out in this book is that we—and our students—can do the same.

The book’s embrace of contemporary theory (and its buzzwords: diversity, race, class, gender, etc.) does not hinder its usefulness or accessibility. Galt’s thesis is clear. She believes that “the connections between telling history and telling a story can...be used to enhance the writing of each. When interpreted with the techniques of creative writing, history takes on the vibrancy of lived experience.” Likewise, she notes, creative writers benefit from the study of history, broadly defined. They learn of the importance of memory, of the need for accurate detail. They also benefit from the diverse human perspectives they’ll encounter: “Writers struggling to enter the experience of an historical people vastly different from themselves may appreciate how complex we are, interacting with nature and technology, with beliefs and laws, differently gifted and full of surprises.”

Galt’s thesis introduces two fundamental questions for people who write history (and for creative writers as well): Am I telling the story accurately? and, Am I making the story come alive? Galt’s liberating answer to the first question draws upon poststructuralist thinking about language and perception. Historical accuracy, to a degree, she argues, is in the eye of the beholder. Had he lived to tell the tale, George Armstrong Custer’s story of what happened at the Little Bighorn River in 1876 would be quite different than the version related by Sioux holy man Black Elk in Black Elk Speaks. Writing history is interpretation. How else do we account for the various, often conflicting, historical accounts of the same event—the assassination of JFK, for instance?

The second question—how can writers make the story come alive?—is answered throughout the book. Galt incorporates a process-based approach to teaching writing and leads teachers and students through over twenty exercises designed to inspire thoughtful, meaningful, historically-based student writing.

The book contains six chapters and three useful appendices. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of the American experience and offers writing exercises which draw upon the sources and events of that experience. Chapter One, The Family in History, contains four writing exercises: 1. Close Ties: Poems about Grandparents and Parents; 2. Poems of Family History; 3. Collecting Clues from Historical Sites and Objects; 4. A Lesson in Names. All writing exercises are rated according to difficulty. Most are appropriate for upper elementary through adult students, though some in the
latter half of the book are designed for junior-high through the adult level.

Each exercise is well-introduced and explained, with step-by-step heuristics included to guide teacher and students through the writing process. Chapter One, Exercise Two (Poems of Family History) includes the following steps: Step One: Conducting Oral Histories (or Life Reviews) with Family Members; Step Two: Brainstorming and Drafting the Poem; Step Three: Reading Student Examples. Here students conduct interviews and draft poems which seek to place family members within the context of their historical moment. In Exercise Four (A Lesson in Names), students write short essays or poems about the origin and history of their names, and are guided through the exercise in five well-explained and illustrated steps.

The five remaining chapters follow the same organizational scheme and cover the following general topics: Heroes and Heroines; Discovery and Trade; Tracking Years and Land in North America; War, Violence, and Protest; and Migration, Technology, and Social Change. Throughout the book, Galt provides many interesting examples, by professional writers and other students, that teachers can share with their own students. There are also useful illustrations, maps, and photographs.

The three appendices—How to Create a Writing Assignment with an Historical Slant; Historical Sources; and Tips for Looking at Photographs—are also worthwhile, and will help teachers guide their students through many of these writing assignments.

In my view, the greatest strength of this text is its revisionist treatment of American history and historiography, its quest to grant empowering voices to all American lives and experiences. Teachers throughout Wisconsin, it seems to me, would welcome a text which offers writing assignments such as "A Lesson in Names," Where students from our many ethnic backgrounds, German, Polish, Irish, African-American, Hmong, Italian, etc., could bring that diversity into focus in such a useful, interesting way.

The book's biggest weakness, on the other hand, rests in its rather narrow, linear view of the writing process. Though that process is still quite mysterious to us, researchers and theorists generally agree that the documentable, observable activities writers engage in (brainstorming, drafting, revision, etc.) do not take place consistently in any regular order. When you factor in the mystery, the "art" of the process, the writing process becomes even more difficult to map. Therefore, they describe the act of writing as a discursive, rather than a linear, process. In other words, the process of producing a poem about family history described in Chapter One contains many more steps than the three (interviews, drafting, examples/revision) included here, and these steps occur in an order that cannot be mapped so simply. Oversimplifying the craft and art of writing can make it seem formulaic, mechanistic.

But this may be a theoretical point difficult to apply, in practical terms, in the classroom. It may be argued that three (or four, or five) steps taken in a row are better than none at all, particularly if they help our students learn to write well. The purpose of this book is to help us teach our students to do that, and to expand our view of American history so that the stories all of us have to tell are included. By these standards, The Story in History does what it sets out to do, and does it well.
Write Using Books as Your Vehicle

Authored by Wendy Jones

Authors use books like vehicles, to transport readers places. After reading some books, readers can take hold of the controls and become apprenticed authors ready to pen similar adventures. Here are a few of those books that beckon upper elementary school students to come and sit in the driver’s seat; that leave the door open for students to write their own rides while using the author’s vehicle.

Byrd Baylor, in his book, Guess Who My Favorite Person Is, invites readers to travel a scenic route. In the story, a man and a girl play a game where they describe some of their favorite things. When the man tells the girl that his favorite color is blue, she responds with, “In this game you can’t just say it’s blue. You have to say what kind of blue.” And he continues to describe “...the blue on a lizard’s belly. That sudden kind of blue you see just for a second...” The two new found friends discuss their favorite things such as their favorite thing to touch, favorite sounds, favorite places to live, favorite dreams, favorite things to taste, and favorite things to smell.

After reading this book aloud, let your students take turns in the driver’s seat by playing the game with partners. They can either make up their own questions to ask their partners or use the same ones from the book. Remind them of the rules, that the favorite things should be descriptive enough to enable the other partner to see a picture drawn with words.

As the students play this game, have them jot down their answers. Then, once the game is over, ask the students to travel even further by crafting their ideas into poems. Students will be eager to share their creations. Here is a poem composed by a fourth grader after he played the game.

My Favorite Things

My favorite bug is a beetle, a shiny metallic green beetle that eats ants.
My favorite thing to do is play football and run after the quarterback with the wind in my face.
My favorite color is blue like the sea after a storm.
My favorite thing to feel is a stone washed over and around 100 times in a river.
My favorite thing to look at is a rainbow, a bright shiny beautiful one.
My favorite thing to hear is millions of birds chirping early on a sunny morning.
My favorite thing to smell is a fire late at night with lots of pine cones in it.
My favorite things are like these but millions more.

—by Nate Jones

Paul Fleischman takes readers on a safari ride through a jungle of rhythmic noise in his books, Joyful Noise— Poems for Two Voices and I Am Phoenix— Poems for 2 Voices. These poems, to be read with partners, simulate sounds, give information, and tell stories about insects and birds. Although reading the poems aloud can be challenging, most students will be eager to practice in order to recite their poems for the class.

Taking over this jungle jeep is easy and fun for the students. As partners, they create and illustrate their own poems for two voices and share them with the class. Here is a poem written by two third graders:

* Note: Voice one reads from the left column, and voice two from the right column. Where both columns have writing, both voices read.
Butterfly

I started
And grew
Bright
Yellow
Orange
Red
and
Pink polka dots
too.
One day
flying
high in
the air
and a
man caught
me there.
Ten minutes
I escaped
And then
of hunger

—by Nicole Ebel and Jessie Palmer

introduces them to 11 funny characters in Watch Out for These Weirdos. Willy who always acts silly, Ryan who’s always crying, Sue who belongs in a zoo, and Jenny who won’t lend you a penny are a few of the kids on the block. The sketches are written in “Wanted Poster” format, with headings for age, weight, hair, eyes, favorite saying, wanted for, latest crime, and approach with caution.

Students can take over the wheel of this story by either writing a character sketch for themselves or their own fictitious friends. Ambitious writers may include Kline’s or their own characters in original stories. Here is a sketch written by a fourth grader:

Wanted
Nate “the Great” Jones

Age: Disguised as an 80 year old
Height: 7 feet, but he might have stilts
Weight: 187 pounds, but he may have something up his sleeve
Hair: Black with rabbit droppings in it
Eyes: Always changing (magic trick)
Favorite Saying: “It almost worked!”
Wanted for: Saying he could change into Superman
Latest Crime: Locking Margaret in a trunk and trying to cut her in half
Approach With Caution: He might turn you into a cockroach!

The students can assemble the projects into classroom books, complete with illustrations, and display them in class or in the school media center.

Rufus Kline routes his readers on a bus ride through a middle class neighborhood as he...
Be alert for other books that lend themselves to student navigation. Some more examples that students can use as models for further writing include:

—Margaret Wise Brown’s, The Important Book

Have your readers write about how some common objects, such as a shoe, an apple, and the wind, are important.

—Tomi Ungerer’s, Crictor

Have each reader write about a strange pet and its effect on his or her family or community.

—James Stevenson’s, Worse Than Willy

Have your readers write about a problem that is worse than anything imaginable.

—Carol Carrick’s, What Happened to Patrick’s Dinosaurs?

Have your readers write their own explanation for one of earth’s mysteries.

Happy Driving!

WORKS CITED


Kline, Rufus. 1990. Watch Out For These Weirdos! New York: Puffin.


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