



“BEST CLASS EVER!”

THE TOP 10 ACTIVITIES FOR THE ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

Gathered, collected, honed, and refined over the course of two decades in secondary and postsecondary education, the activities presented in this workshop are guaranteed to have your students coming up to you afterwards and saying, “Best class ever!” Whether it’s an activity based on a popular game show that brings out our passion for literature, a unit on World Mythologies that uses the framework of reality TV, or a hilarious poetry activity that sees students marry human emotions with mundane objects, participants will get a first-hand look at some phenomenal classroom activities by getting right in there and having a blast doing them! Participants looking for a fun, activities-based workshop that can be taken directly back to the classroom need look no further.

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READING FOR THE LOVE OF IT, 2016

INTRODUCTION

How Do Great Classes Happen?

IT would be presumptuous of me to stand up here at RFTLOI 2016 and tell you how great classes happen if, in the same breath, I led you to believe that I only ever have great classes happen. I can assure you that throughout my teaching career I've had—as we have all had—no small number of duds, flops, and absolute stinkers. You know those classes I'm talking about. The ones where, if a principal or school administrator happened to sit down and observe you for twenty minutes, they'd be hard pressed to do anything but find an opportune moment to gently interrupt with “Thanks, but I think I'll have to stop you there.” If that *has* happened to you then—well—congratulations! You've obviously managed to recover from the trauma.

With the activities we'll take a look at today, though, it would be difficult to go too far wrong. These aren't just activities, I'll have you know, where I painstakingly spent hours devising the perfect lesson, because we all know that those ones are usually met with indifference at best. A mathematics teacher would probably tell us that “the success of a class varies inversely with the number of hours spent preparing it,” but that's why I didn't invite any of them today. All kidding aside, it is still genuinely annoying when I've carefully devised a lesson and somewhere in the middle of it realize that the students just don't care about any of it—at all.

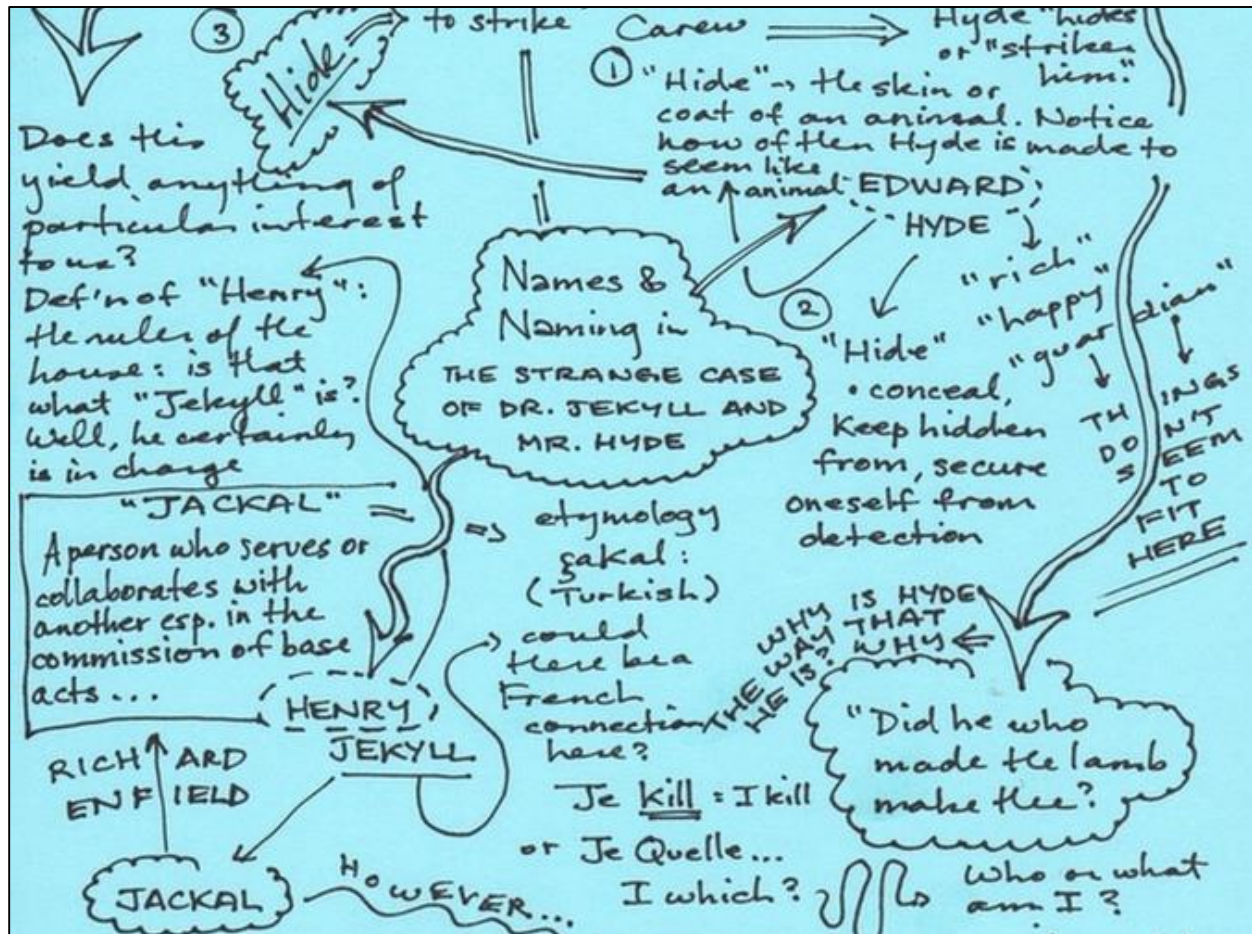
Most of the lessons I'm going to share with you today had a kind of odd introduction to my teaching practice. Students found them amusing, or engaging, or both, and I wasn't really expecting it. Their reaction, however, motivated me to develop the activities further and to try them with new and different audiences. These aren't simply activities for elementary school students or high school students. I've used some of the same ones with middle schoolers and educational administrators, with kids in Grade 3 and Ph.D. candidates in the education program at U of T.

When I started to think about the kinds of activities students have enjoyed in my classes it was only after giving some thought to ones that they typically haven't enjoyed. I'm not referring of course to those days when we're just not on our game. No one enjoys a class when the class isn't very good. I mean the classes that I was sure they *would* enjoy but didn't. It's taken some time to accept a rather counterintuitive proposition: the math teacher I mentioned above is right -- the amount of time spent preparing doesn't determine whether I hit a pedagogical home run. The mere fact that we have spent hours creating a learning experience probably says something about how great we think it is—and about our passion for teaching—but not about how students will respond to it. That means, I think, that the idea for an activity has to be great—and it has to be great in the eyes of the student who is being required to participate in it. That's why it often makes sense to try out a new concept or approach and see how students react before bringing to bear on it hours and hours of painstaking preparation.

In my investigations, I've found that students enjoy activities when one or more of the following criteria are met: (1) they both cooperate and compete, (2) they have fun, (3) they feel smart, (4) they recognize that their choices matter, and (5) they see that something has been learned—about themselves, their friends, or the wider world they live in—that they want to tell someone about.

These are really the guiding principles behind the activities that follow. I hope your students enjoy them as much as mine have. I'm confident they will.

10. FIGURING OUT WHAT'S IN A NAME



Description: This activity begins with students researching what their name means—first and last. Some students may know—usually there’s at least one student whose parents have told them at some point what their name means—but more often than not kids have no idea. They enjoy this, in my experience, because the class begins with a focus on something that is uniquely them: their name.

When students have had a chance to discover and share, the teacher introduces them to the field of inquiry they’ve just investigated: *onomastics*. This is the study of names and naming, and when it’s applied to literature it’s called *literary onomastics*. Do critics actually spend their time doing this? As it turns out, a fair number of them do as is evidenced by organizations like the American Names Society (<http://www.wtsn.binghamton.edu/ans/>). However, by no means should onomastics be introduced as a profound and weighty field of literary scholarship. I mean, c’mon—what are students going to think about people actually belonging to society where they sit around and talk about names and naming!

(And trust me, if you think the characters on *The Big Bang Theory* are nerdy, these folks take nerdiness to an entirely different level. I know this for a fact, because I’m a former member of the ANS and even gave a paper at their conference in Chicago in 1998.)

Depending on the age of your students and the particular book or story you are reading, the next step is to have students look at the names of the characters they are reading about. Although they might not realize it, writers often take a rather extraordinary amount of time coming up with their characters' names, and some of them, like J. K. Rowling, find it hard to write when they haven't yet finalized what these names will be. The best strategy, in my experience, is to have students take an inquiry-based approach to the activity and to create a crazy mind map or visible thinking poster that is pieced together with their discoveries.

Another approach is a technology-assisted Harkness discussion. Here are the results of one that lasted twenty minutes in which the students discussed names and naming in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and I summarized the discussion.

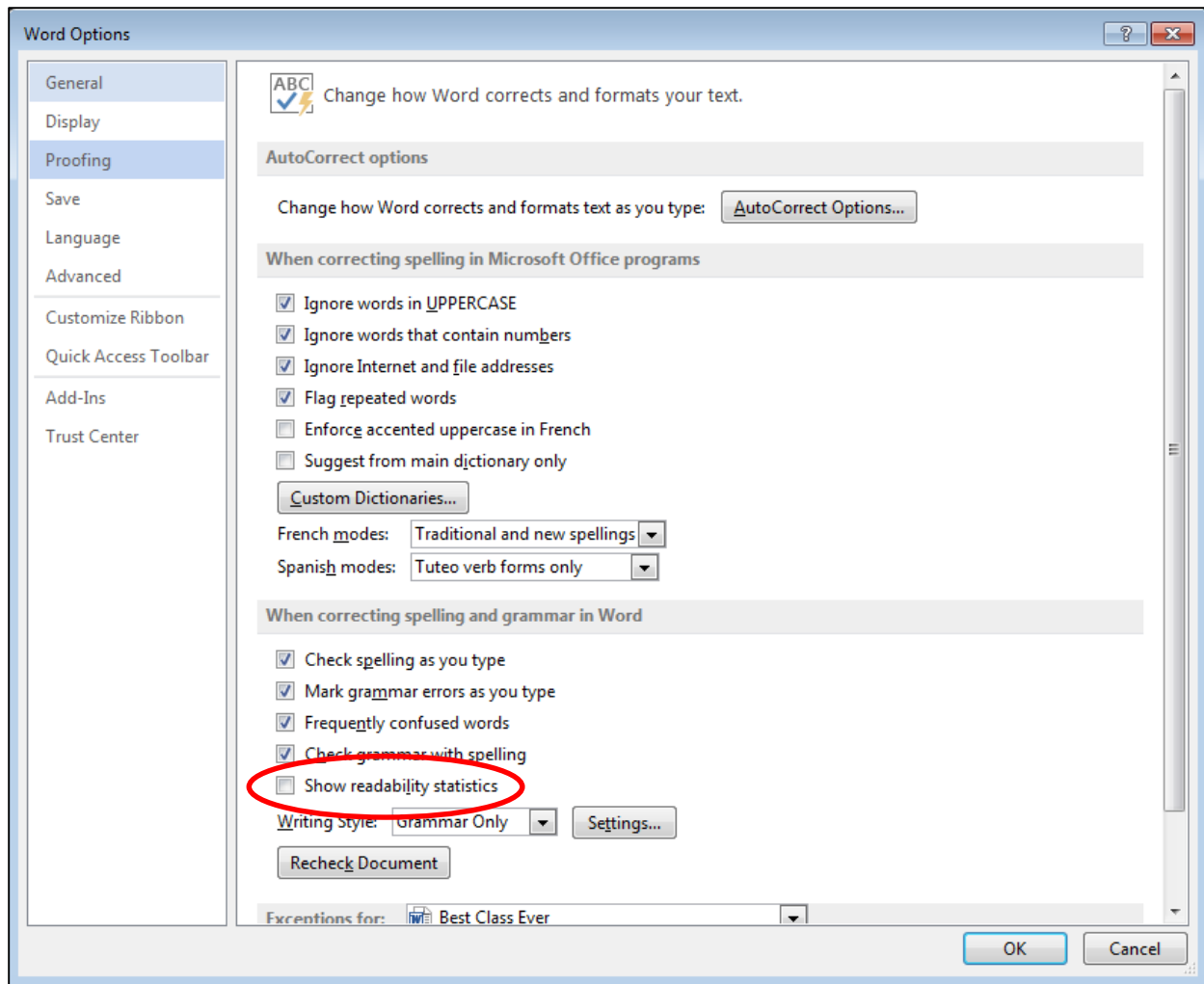
Q. How do you suppose that the name Edward "Hyde" was chosen?

- It could be a play on the game ("Hyde and Seek"). What about "Hyde" Park? Why is there a "y" in Hyde's name? Would putting an "l" be too obvious?
- Maybe the "y" in Hyde's name is a "why," like the question. After all, Hyde doesn't like to be upfront about what he says...
- What does "hide" mean?
 1. To conceal oneself (Hyde hides in Jekyll),
 2. The skin of an animal (He looks like an animal of sorts, a less evolved human being),
 3. To beat or flog severely (poor Sir Danvers).
- Doesn't "Hyde" hide in all of these ways?

Q. If Hyde's name is significant, what about that of Henry "Jekyll"?

- Harry is sometimes used in place of Henry. (Is this a play on "Hairy," i.e. a less evolved Hyde?)
 - Jekyll = Je kyll = Je kill = I kill?
 - What about Jekyll = Je quel = I what?
 - Could Jekyll = Jackal? Let's see what the dictionary tells us...
 - **jack·al** (jăk'əl, -ôl) *n.*
 1. Any of several doglike mammals of the genus *Canis* of Africa and southern Asia that are mainly foragers feeding on plants, small animals, and occasionally carrion.
 2. An accomplice or a lackey who aids in the commission of base or disreputable acts.
 3. One who performs menial tasks for another
 - How is Henry Jekyll like a jackal? He works "with Hyde" in a sense to cover up his "indiscretions." He gets him a house, furnishes it, and makes sure that he has a place in which to "hide"...er...himself.
-

There are so many works we study in English and Language Arts for which investigating names and naming makes sense. Try it with your classes and you'll find that it gives students a tool for investigating works of literature that empowers them.



Have students check this box, because it's going to allow them to access something that the folks at Microsoft default as unchecked. Now when they proofread their writing using the Spelling and Grammar button, the program is going to provide them with additional information.

Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	901
Characters	4324
Paragraphs	13
Sentences	41
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	5.8
Words per Sentence	21.6
Characters per Word	4.6
Readability	
Passive Sentences	29%
Flesch Reading Ease	51.8
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	11.3

Passive Sentences are self-explanatory and are represented as a percentage of the paper. The **Flesch Reading Ease** and **Flesch-Kincaid Grade** Level scores identify the approximate level of reading ability required in order to process and understand the physical language of the text. The equations used to calculate these numbers don't know what words mean, just how many words and syllables they have.

When they first use this feature, students always begin to compare their Grade Level score. Initially, they figure that the student with the highest score has written the most erudite piece of prose. When a student has a rather high score, however, it's often the case that they have issues with run-on sentences. The exercise gives them one piece of empirical information but they need others in order to be able to develop an understanding of what they've written from a numbers perspective.

Now, have students count the number of words in each of their sentences. This will give them an important understanding of the extent to which they have, or don't have, sentence length variety. When a student discovers that they've constructed a number of successive short to mid-length sentences, they should figure out a way to introduce a conjunction or two to vary the lengths. Unless the series of short sentences is being used to achieve a particular rhetorical effect, it will almost always represent a weakness in their writing.

Other useful pieces of empirical information to look at are the first four words of every sentence and the different verbs students use throughout the paper. Weaker papers rely very heavily on iterations of the verb "to be" and successive sentences will often begin in very similar ways.

Once students have explored these things, they can get even more empirical data about their papers by visiting http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp.

Number of characters (without spaces) :	1,161.00
Number of words :	267.00
Number of sentences :	10.00
Average number of characters per word :	4.35
Average number of syllables per word :	1.40
Average number of words per sentence:	26.70
<i>Indication of the number of years of formal education that a person requires in order to easily understand the text on the first reading</i>	
Gunning Fog index :	13.53
<i>Approximate representation of the U.S. grade level needed to comprehend the text :</i>	
Coleman Liau index :	8.69
Flesch Kincaid Grade level :	11.40
ARI (Automated Readability Index) :	12.40
SMOG :	11.83
Flesch Reading Ease :	60.91

This website provides students with a wealth of empirical information and calculates the grade level of their text using a variety of different indices, like Gunning Fog, Coleman Liau index, and the ARI. The calculations above, you may be interested to know, is for the text of the Gettysburg Address.

With all of this empirical data, students have one last place to visit. My recommendation, based primarily on its simplicity of use, is www.wordle.net.

WRITING DIAGNOSIS

Name:

Assignment:

[Paste your assignment here]

OPENING WORD STRINGS (first four words)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Observations:

GRADE LEVEL

Coleman-Lau:	Flesch-Kincaid:	ARI:	SMOG:
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This indicates that the paper's readability is appropriate for a student in Grade _____.

SENTENCE WORD COUNTS

Words per Sentence									
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Observations:

WORDLE ANALYSIS OF WORD FREQUENCIES

[Paste your Wordle here]

Observations:

AREAS REQUIRING ATTENTION

CHECKLIST

Before submitting your essay, please make sure to have completed the Writing Diagnosis sheet and to have signed off on each of the points below. Ensuring that you have done these things will help your writing achieve at the highest possible level.

1. I have checked my paper for things that might cause the reader to stop.
2. I have checked my paper again for these things.
3. I have read my paper backwards to check for spelling errors.
4. I have looked at the first four words of each of my sentences to see if I have avoided being repetitive.
5. I have counted the number of words in each sentence to make sure that I don't have too many really short sentences all in a row.
6. I have taken my text and put it into Wordle to see if there are words that I am overusing.
7. I have gone to www.online-utility.org to check the grade level scores for my paper. I have made sure that the grade level is not way too low or way too high.
8. If the grade level scores are a bit high, I have double-checked to make sure I don't have any run-on sentences or comma splices.
9. I have written down brief observations on the things I have found since these might help me the next time around. They might also help me to understand the instructor's feedback.
10. I have checked my paper a final time for any and all corrections it might need.

8. DECONSTRUCTING AESOP

The Crow and the Pitcher

A Crow perishing with thirst saw a pitcher, and hoping to find water, flew to it with delight. When he reached it, he discovered to his grief that it contained so little water that he could not possibly get at it. He tried everything he could think of to reach the water, but all his efforts were in vain. At last he collected as many stones as he could carry and dropped them one by one with his beak into the pitcher, until he brought the water within his reach and thus saved his life.

Necessity is the mother of invention.

Description: This activity is perfect with younger audiences, although I've used it both with Middle Schoolers and with educational administrators and regardless of audience it never fails to impress. The idea of the activity is to get students to challenge commonly accepted readings of a text. With a younger audience I'm wanting them to challenge what they are reading; with an older one I might be using this as an introduction to Critical Theory.

Have students read Aesop's "The Crow and the Pitcher." Once they have done this, break them into groups and have them begin to put together alternative morals for the fable. There is nothing wrong with them re-articulating the existing moral in their own way, but after a few minutes remind them that they can come up with whatever reading of the fable they like, regardless of whether or not it means something similar to "Necessity is the mother of invention." When students have been given a few minutes to do this, have them begin to share their morals. You can ask for volunteers who have come up with morals similar to the existing one. Then, begin to ask students for morals that might be a bit stranger, more subversive, or that have derived a totally different meaning from the fable. When I've done this activity with educational administrators, I see whether or not they can come up with ones as

clever or insightful as those arrived at by middle schoolers. Usually the education folk don't fare as well as their charges.

Let's Compare Our Morals with What Students Have Come up with.

- **Be prepared.**
- **Only the fittest survive.**
- **Always keep your pitcher full.**
- **Clean your pitcher before you use it.**
- **A pitcher that's half empty is really half full.**
- **Sometimes it's okay to put rocks in your mouth.**

When you introduce this kind of an activity, students find its subversive nature empowering. I once did it with a Grade 7 class while a teacher from England who was visiting our school sat in. After doing the exercise, I asked students what they thought the moral was trying to teach them. One student stood up and argued that she didn't think the moral was about "necessity being the mother of invention." She thought it was attempting to make the point that those who govern should be like the crow. A wise leader, she went on, knows how to best use the people in his or her community (the rocks) to maximize what they can contribute. When the leader does this, it raises the community (like water) to its highest potential. If that wasn't enough, another student broke in and argued that it wasn't about that at all. It was an economics metaphor dealing with the importance of wise investments for the overall financial health of a community. When the class was over and the students had left, the woman who had been sitting in slowly stood up. I could see she had been crying.

"I—I—can't believe your students," she said. "I have never seen anything like it!"

"Yeah," I said, nonchalantly, "It was nice that some of the weaker kids participated today."

7. PLAYING STORIES

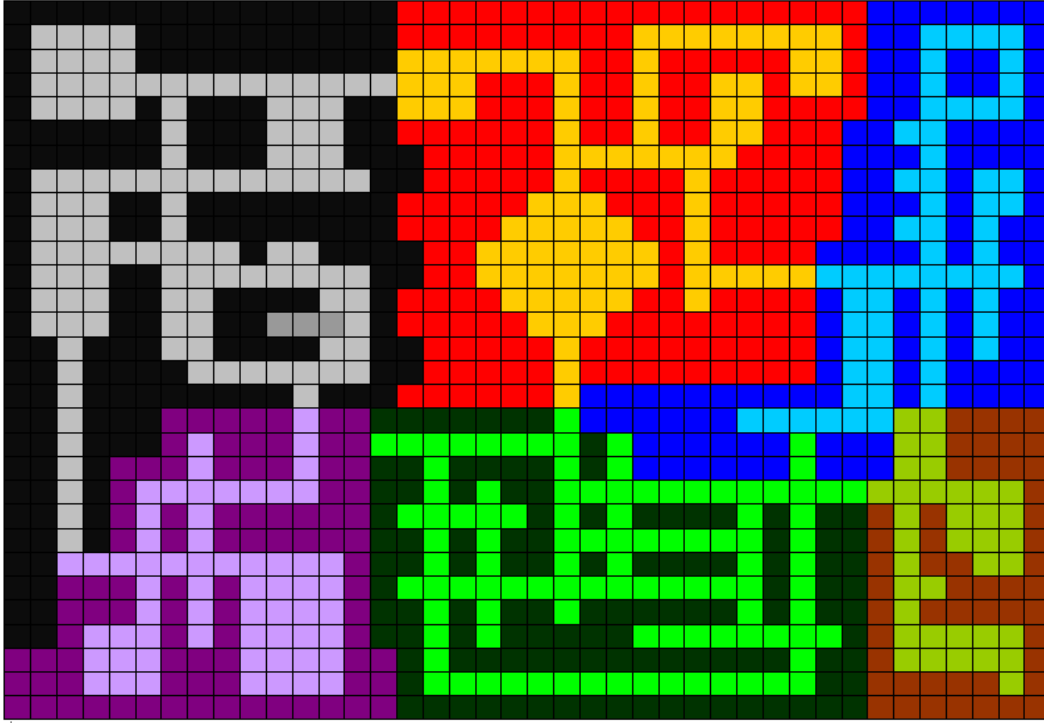


Overview: During my years teaching Middle School English, I often used a combination of co-operative and competitive play in approaching literary texts. Two successes I had to this end were the development of a multimedia role-playing game in which students “played” Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* by adopting the personas of the characters in the story and experiencing their adventures first-hand, and the exploration of World Mythologies using the template of the popular reality show, *The Amazing Race*. Here is how they can work in your classroom.

There and Back Again

Description. This activity works well at the middle school level, but can be adapted for other audiences. During the course of studying Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, students participate in a role-playing game in which they take responsibility for characters in the novel. The game requires the following preparation.

- A dungeon map is created and projected onto the Smartboard. It can be done in something as simple as a Google Spreadsheet and is designed to reflect the various stages of the quest that Bilbo and the dwarves undertake to reclaim the Lonely Mountain from Smaug the Dragon.



- A PowerPoint or Prezi is designed which explains the rules of the game and contains questions which students answer as part of the game. The questions can take on a variety of different forms, although maintaining a consistent level of difficulty is usually important.

3. Bombur finds the key to the troll's lair

False. Bilbo finds the key—not bad for a short burglar!

- The game includes tokens for the players or even painted miniatures and dungeon tiles. Pewter miniatures can be found in a store like *Games Workshop* and the dungeon tiles work well as painted wooden blocks. The idea is that students each have a character that they move across the dungeon tiles. Depending on where they place their characters, what decisions they make in the game, how they cooperate with their fellow adventurers, and how they demonstrate their knowledge of the text, students earn rewards (and occasionally suffer minor setbacks) as they cooperatively progress towards the ultimate goal of recovering the dwarves' kingdom.



The game is extremely popular with Middle School students—boys and girls alike—especially when it's paired with assessments that are equally creative, like a Fantasy Trading card assignment in which students design trading cards (think *Magic the Gathering* or *Yu-Gi-Oh*) of the characters they have chosen to play in the game.

The game itself works, however, because it does a few things very well:

- It allows students to participate in both competitive and cooperative play while still engaging in the process of exploring a work of literature.
 - It gives students the opportunity to be successful in sharing their experiences of the novel with their peers.
 - It permits the students to become the characters they read about, to experience the events of the story in the way these characters do, and to work with one another in analyzing a literary text by “playing” it.
 - It directs the students' attention in a meaningful way to the different technologies they are using. Students learn how presentation software and even spreadsheets can be used creatively to engage an audience.
 - It allows them to get up out of their seats, interact with the Smartboard, organize their characters within the physical space of the game, plan strategies, ask questions, think about what they are doing in relation to what their characters do in the novel, and understand that their interactions with the text in this way are producing meaning.
 - Most importantly, because the game they are playing will diverge from the main action of the novel, the interplay between the narrative they are creating and the one they are reading begins to raise questions about the characters in Tolkien's story and the decisions they are making.
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The Amazing Mythology Race

THE AMAZING MYTHOLOGY RACE

Stage 3

You now cross time and space, traveling thousands of miles eastward and thousands of years in time back into the distant recesses of human history. You find yourself on the shore of the Pacific Ocean looking off into the clear blue distance...

Description: Another unit that students love is one that puts the study of world mythologies into the framework of the popular reality-TV program, *The Amazing Race*. Students compete in pairs to race around the virtual world and explore the mythological traditions of different ancient cultures. As in the game show, each leg of the race features a Detour, Road Block, and Fast Forward, which the students earn points for completing and submitting to me electronically, via text or email. Sometimes a student might have to determine the meaning of an Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyph, and sometimes they might have to uncover the identity of a particular individual from Arthurian legend or Celtic mythology.

 <p>FAST FORWARD</p>  <p>You must decipher the hieroglyph shown above and send your instructor an email proving that your answer is unquestionably correct.</p>	 <p>ROAD BLOCK</p> <p>You must tell me which knight had magical armour that rendered him invulnerable.</p>
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As the students travel across the globe, they earn points based on how quickly and correctly they can provide answers to the Detour, Road Block, and Fast Forward (the latter of which can only be answered once per group during the race), with the highest point-earning group in a particular leg arriving “first,” and no group, of course, being eliminated (since a point system is being used).

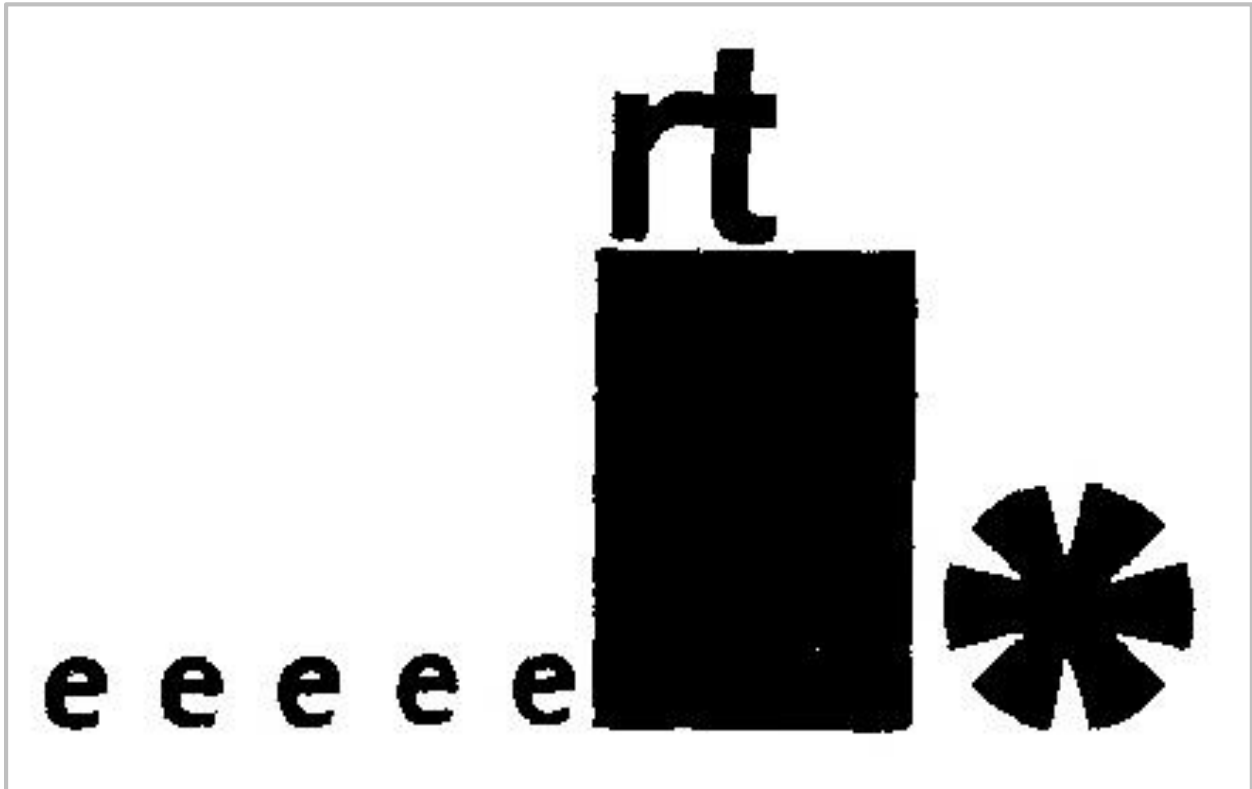
Amazing Race Team Name	Fast Forward	Finished the Road Block	Finished the Detour	Aggregate Score	Total Points at End of Leg
Raven	1	N/A	N/A	1	2000
Isis		1	1	2	1600
Quetzalcoatl		4	2	6	1200
Artemis		3	5	8	1000
Freya		2	6	8	1000
Indra		5	3	8	1000
Shang-Ti		6	4	10	800

Students read everything from Nigerian folktales, to Native Canadian poetry, to Arthurian legends, while participating in a cooperative and competitive approach to studying World Mythologies. Like *There and Back Again*, *The Amazing Mythology Race* is also a big hit with students because:

- In addition to studying mythology, which is very popular with Middle School students, they have an opportunity to develop the competitive and cooperative learning strategies.
- Students learn how to work in partnerships, but while engaged in tasks that are part of a game rather than inextricably connected to their English mark. This allows them to deal with some of the problems that young students have while working in partnerships *before* they do this sort of thing as part of an evaluated assignment.
- As students come to the end of one leg of the race, they become intensely interested about the next, not only because they are excited about discovering a new set of myths, but because they want to know where the race will take them and what challenges they will face.
- Off-task behaviour is virtually eliminated, because any time a student’s attention seems to be focused on his or her laptop, and not on a particular myth we are discussing, the student is usually trying to complete one or more tasks related to the race!

Ultimately, in the contemporary classroom, competitive play tends to be discouraged in favour of cooperative activities, but the fusion of both—especially when assisted by what a thoughtful use of different technologies affords us—can be powerful learning tool in the Middle School classroom.

6. TEACHING POETRY, BOTH ABSTRACT & CONCRETE



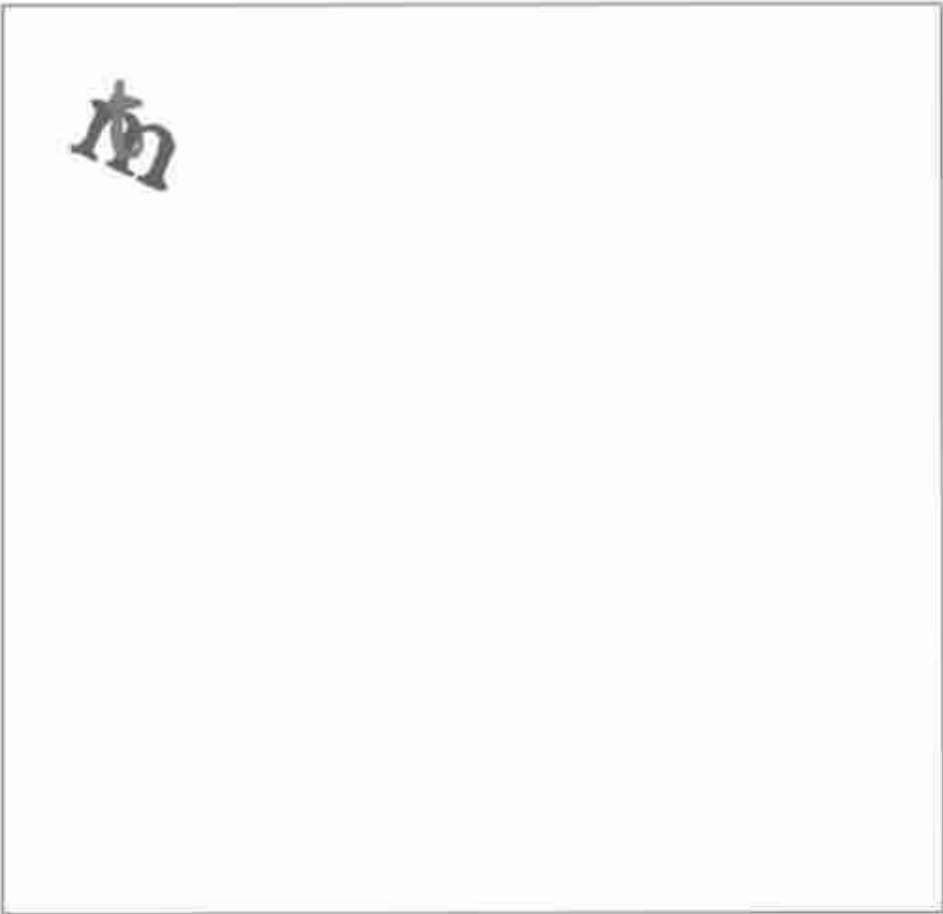
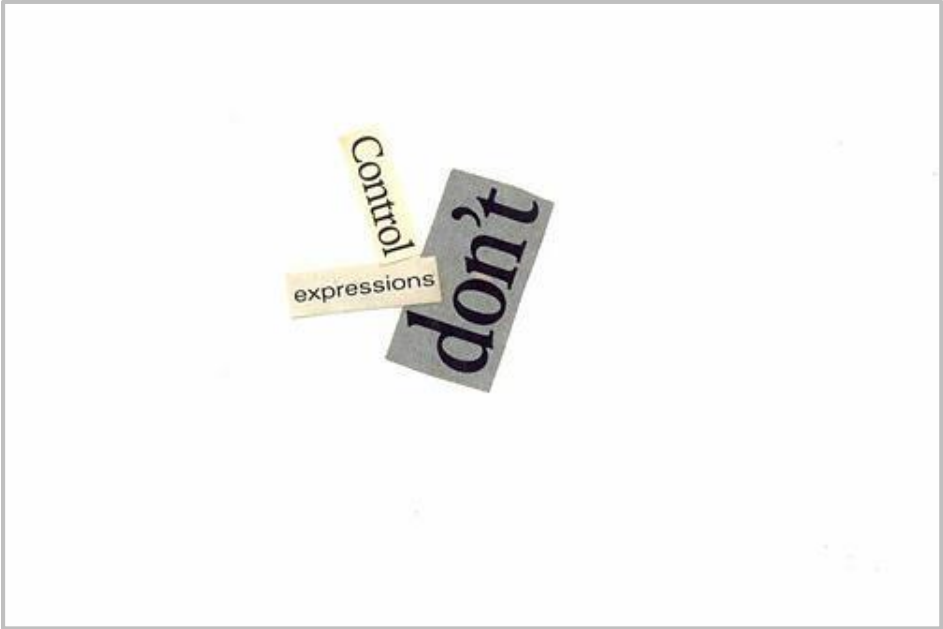
I think one of the challenges of teaching poetry to young people is context. We begin a unit on the poetry of Emily Dickinson or William Blake or Robert Frost, often by having students read aloud poems that they know nothing about. Then we read the first poem aloud so that they can hear what it's supposed to sound like and we tell them what it's supposed to mean (okay, these days we tell them that poetry is open to interpretation and that their feelings and ideas are valid and then we tell them what the poem is supposed to mean).

If that doesn't sound like a recipe for abject boredom I don't know what does.

What students like about looking at concrete minimalist poetry is the perception that we're on the same critical playing field. There is often little investment on the part of students to go outside the box when they perceive that any possible reading of a traditional poem is subject to my tacit or explicit approval. In the case of the above poem, however, I may well be no more qualified to judge its meaning or implications than they are.

As a way of introducing a unit on poetry, it's hard to beat. It eliminates their anxieties about poetry, because they honestly buy into the idea that I could analyze the poem and might not know what the hell I'm talking about. If you think about it, it's a bit scary for the teacher but quite refreshing for the student.

Here are a couple of other poems you can look at with your class. These are great just to open the discussion about what poetry is, isn't, or might be.



When it comes to having students write poetry, English / Language Arts teachers tend to fall into different camps. Some, let's be frank, don't teach their students to write poetry. Some will do so once the students have studied a particular form, thereby giving them an opportunity to write the kind of poetry they're being expected to analyze. Others among us tend to be far less prescriptive, allowing students to write poetry in a blog or journal as their fancy strikes them. Still others will allow poetry, or a combination of poetry and visual art, to be an assessment option for a given unit.

However, once you've let students have a go at concrete minimalist poetry and broken down some of the walls that they put up, a great activity to get them writing their own poems is an exercise I call, "The Object of My Emotion." A line is drawn down the centre of the board. Students come up one at a time and write down a human emotion, quality, or characteristic in the left-hand column, like "despair" or "longing" or "animosity," and a mundane, everyday object in the right-hand column, like "screwdriver" or "melon" or "laptop." When all the students have done this, the teacher then has them return to the board one at a time. Now, the student chooses one of the terms from the left-hand column and one from the right, assigning this combination to anyone they wish. The latter must now write a 50 word poem in which he or she explores the metaphor of bringing these two things together (e.g. "Animosity is a Screwdriver" or "Despair is Like a Melon"). The student who has been saddled with this lovely subject for his or her poem now gets to go up to the board and pick out a pairing for the next victim...

Students love this activity, and the quality of work that you get from them in having them stretch their mental faculties to make the connections is fantastic:

Falling Out of Love Is Like a Wall Clock

I mean, who needs you anymore,
looking at me with that face?
What's that? You're saying it's time?
Not for me it isn't!

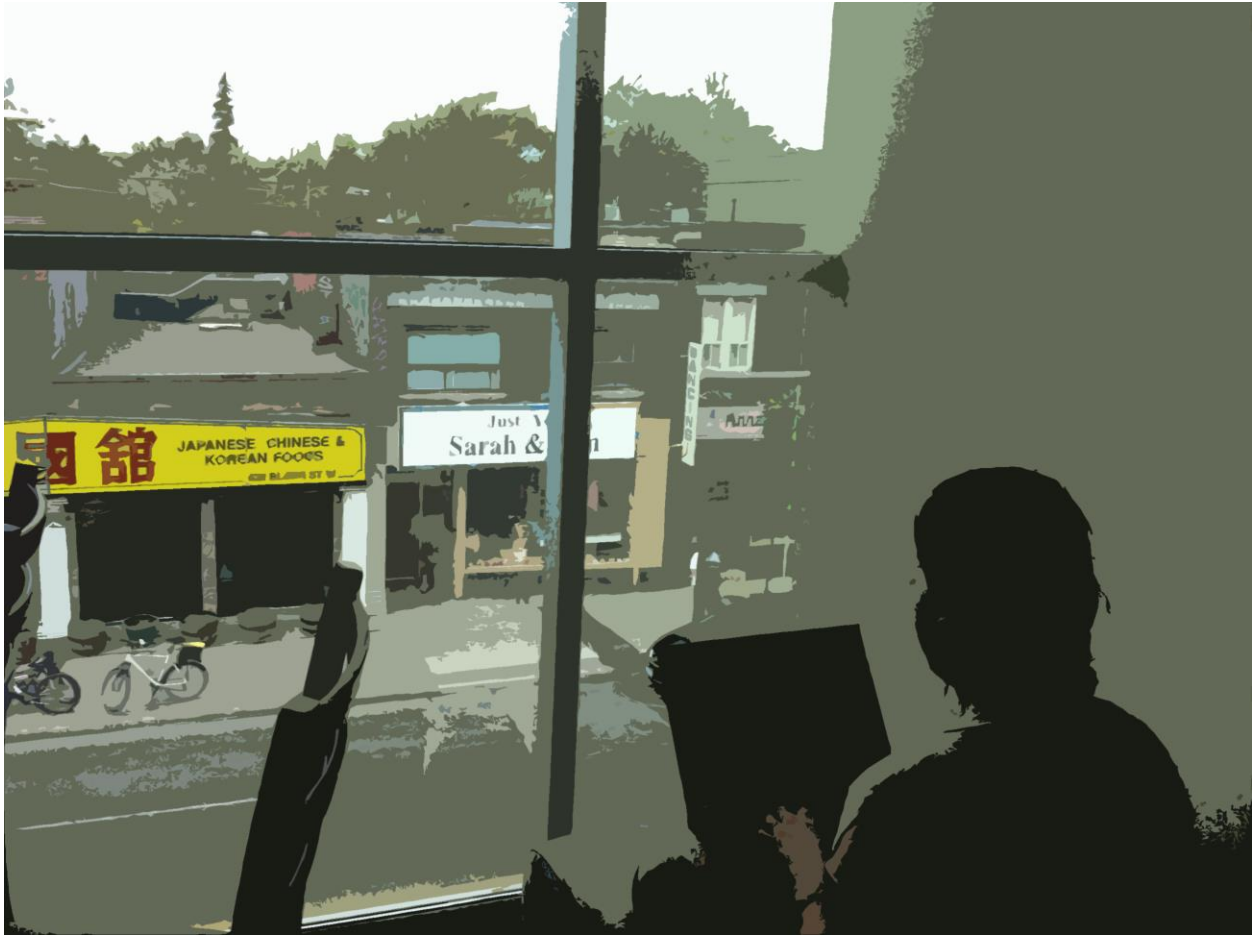
Here I am
(destroyed)
and you could care less...

"Tick, tick, tick..."

I looked up to you--let your hands go
round and
round--

and now what?

5. ORGANIZING A “WRITE OF PASSAGE”



Description: Okay, this is taking things outside the box, and hopefully, outside the classroom, and I’m talking about outside the classroom in a big way. A couple of years ago, I co-organized “Write of Passage,” a one week experience in which a group of Grade 10 students got a whole week to write whatever they wanted and to learn from great writers from all walks of “writerly” life. Now, it’s not always possible to have students out of classes for a whole week, but for those of you who teach at schools where certain weeks are devoted to trips or travel, this can be an amazing experience.

Here’s the original itinerary for “Write of Passage” and some of the work that went with it:

“WRITE” OF PASSAGE

The “*Write*” of Passage Challenge Week experience is an opportunity for a select group of Grade 10 students at to develop their passion, ability, and opportunities for writing. Through a combination of activities, experiences, and workshops, students will come to a better understanding of themselves as writers and of how they might begin to find an audience for their writing.

GOAL

Our goal for the week is to have students create and develop their writing and to have the experience of being a professional writer by learning from those currently working in the field.

DAY 1

Theme: *Drawing Inspiration from Personal Experience*

Location: The Brickworks

“Found Poetry” (9:00-10:00am) – Welcome

Each student is given a section of a newspaper. They browse through their section, looking for an article, advertisement, op-ed piece, or news story. When they’ve found one they like, they have to choose a minimum of three continuous sentences of text and create a found poem out of them. The found poem cannot change the ordering of the words, only the way they are arranged on the paper. When students have composed their poems, they share them with their peers. Then, as a group, we explore the importance of found poetry in the context of drawing inspiration from everyday experiences.

Eric Woolfe – Playwright (10:00-12:15)

Eric will talk about his life as a writer and how he uses everyday experiences as inspiration (10:00-10:45). Then he’ll lead the class in a couple of writing activities that get students thinking about what their sources of inspiration might be and how they can foster creativity (10:45-11:30). Finally, students will have a chance to share their work, and Eric will conclude with some closing remarks (11:30-Noon).

Lunch (12:15 – 1:15pm)

“Object Lesson” (1:15-2:30pm)

Prior to Challenge Week, students are each asked to bring in an object that is important to them. When they come back from lunch, these objects are displayed together on a table in front of them. Each of them must then choose one of the objects that isn’t their own and use it as inspiration to begin a story. At about 1:45, students take turns sharing what they’ve come up with and, if they so choose, explaining the significance of the object they themselves have brought. Over the course of the week, students can develop their “Object Lesson” story as one of the pieces they’d like to include in “*Write*” of *Passage*.

“Writing Time” (2:30-3:15pm)

Throughout the week, students (and facilitators) will be given time to write. Students can use this time for quiet writing, and to ask questions of and share work with the facilitators.

“The Colours Without and Within” (3:00-4:00)

Students are assigned a colour at random, and will go on the trails around the Brickworks, looking only for the colour they have chosen. Their goal is to be inspired by this visual activity and then compose the

first part of a poem whose title is the colour they have selected. The second part of the poem is completed in the evening when the student looks specifically for their chosen colour in their own home.

For Tomorrow

Students should finish their “Colours” poem so they can share it on Day 2. If time permits, they can work on their “Object Lesson” story or one of their own pieces. Throughout the week, students should not write in the evenings beyond what they want to—it should *not* feel like work to them.

DAY 2

Theme: *Drawing Inspiration from Everyday Activities*

Location: The Brickworks

“Sharing our Colours” (9:00-9:45)

Students share poems that they put together based on the “Colour of the Woods” activity the previous day, and both the sharing and discussion that follows leads into a broader discussion about how writers draw inspiration from everyday activities, even those that seem mundane.

Break (9:45-10:00)

“You Are What You Eat Write” (10:00-12:00pm)

Students work with food writer, Calantha Elsby, who will provide them with the knowledge, both through discussion and engaged activity, to improve their writing and to strengthen their critical thinking skills. She’ll also inspire them to embrace their creativity and pursue their interests (be it food writing or otherwise) through a demonstration of the diversity of approaches to food writing and the various outlets for their creativity. Some of the topics she’ll cover in the discussion portion of the day include (1) what food writing is, what its various genres and outlets are, and why it is so popular, (2) what *good* food writing is, (3) the qualities of a good food writer, (4) profiles of well-known food writers, and (5) how to find one’s niche and how writing skills transfer from one area (fiction, say) to another (e.g. writing restaurant reviews).

“Lunch Date” (12:00-1:00pm)

Students have lunch at the Brickworks restaurant with Calantha. The activities and discussions prior to lunch are the building blocks for a final activity. She will reflect with them back on their earlier discussions to examine all of the different factors that impact the experiences we have and share around food. Some of the factors will include the students’ knowledge of the food (whether they’ve tasted it before, what the conditions were when they tasted it, whether they’ve made it at home, whether they understand the techniques used to make it, etc.), who they are with when they experience the food, what is happening in their lives at the time, and what their expectations are about

it. Calantha and the students then discuss what that means for a food critic and how that impacts the food review process, including the dos and don'ts of writing food reviews (or even product reviews), and the need to be aware of biases, as well as the industry.



“Food for Thought” (1:00-2:00)

Back at the Brickworks classroom, students work to create a piece of food writing inspired by Calantha’s visit. It could be a review, a reflection piece, one or more poems, or even something visual. The first drafts are shared with the group, with discussion and feedback shared between the students and facilitators.

“Writing Time” (2:00-3:15)

DAY 3

Theme: *Writing to Tell Our Stories*

Location: The Writer’s Centre

“The 50 Word Short Story” (9:00-9:45)

Given our location at The Writer’s Centre and Jessica’s visit, students do a warm-up activity of writing a 50-word short story about—what else—a writer. The story should be unique, creative, novel, and pack a lot into a short space. After all, this is akin to what writer’s must do on a daily basis—find the time and space in the cramped quarters of their day-to-day lives to write and create.

Break (9:45-10:00)

Jessica Westhead – Short Fiction Writer (10:00-12:00)

Jessica will talk about her life as a writer and will lead the students in activities that develop their ability to write short fiction and to appreciate it as a literary genre worthy of consideration. To this end, Jessica will talk about the inspiration for YOSS (Year of the Short Story).

Lunch (12:00-1:00)

The group will head out for lunch to a nearby restaurant in the Bloor and Christie area.

“It’s in the Cards” (1:00-2:30)

Students are asked to randomly select a series of different coloured cards spread out before them (one red, one blue, one yellow, and one green). The red cards indicate a character, the blue indicate a time, the yellow feature a place, and the green detail a particular circumstance. Out of these details, the students must construct a short story, which they’ll begin at the Writing Centre and have a working draft of for the following day.

Writing Time (2:30-4:00)

DAY 4

Theme: *Writing for Other Media*

Location: The Brickworks

“Sharing Our Stories” (9:00-9:45)

Students have the chance to share their stories from the previous day’s activity. The focus will be on giving students the opportunity to talk about how they “took the cards they were dealt” and turned them into a work of short fiction. Students may only have a working draft completed or a partial draft, but the discussion and sharing will be the focus here.

Break (9:45-10:00)

Leah Cameron – Screenwriter and Director (10:00-12:00)

Students will learn everything they need to know about screenwriting from a professional writer and director. The focus of the workshop will be on what screenwriters actually do and how their craft must meet the demands of both the verbal and the visual.

Lunch (12:00-1:00)

“Lights... Camera... Screenplay” (1:00-4:00)

Students will work in groups of three to develop a screenplay for the opening scene of a film. The group will choose from a selection of different genres and then will be assigned a concept based on the genre they have chosen. Students will spend the first part of the activity brainstorming ideas, the second part writing, and the third part sharing.

Writing Time (2:30-4:00)

Students have a variety of things they can be working on. These include the “Object Lesson” story or “Colours” poem from Day 1, the “Food for Thought” piece from Day 2, the “It’s in the Cards” story from Day 3, or the “Lights... Camera... Screenplay” piece from today. Of course, students are welcome to devote this time exclusively to their own writing.

DAY 5

Theme: Writing for an Audience

Location: The Brickworks

“Writing Showcase” (9:00-9:45)

Students work in groups of three to come up with a concept for how they would like to showcase the writing they have done over the course of the week. They have a half hour to come up with a concept for how their work could be presented, whether as a print publication, ezine, audio journal, or blog. The last fifteen minutes will be sharing and discussion.

Break (9:45-10:00)

Sarah Pinder – Poet (10:00-12:00)

Students will work with poet, Sarah Pinder, who will share readings of her poetry and will talk with students about writing for an audience, specifically in the context of her work with ezines.

Lunch at the Brickworks (12:00-1:00)

“Writing for an Audience” (1:00-2:00)

Students will select one card each from two piles in front of them. In one pile are cards containing a concept or idea and in another are numbers with ages. Students will have one hour to write a poem about the chosen concept for the chosen age group. The focus, of course, will be on audience.

Writing Time (2:00-3:00)

Students have a final opportunity to work on pieces they have been writing over the course of the week. They can also get ready for the sharing activity that ends the week.

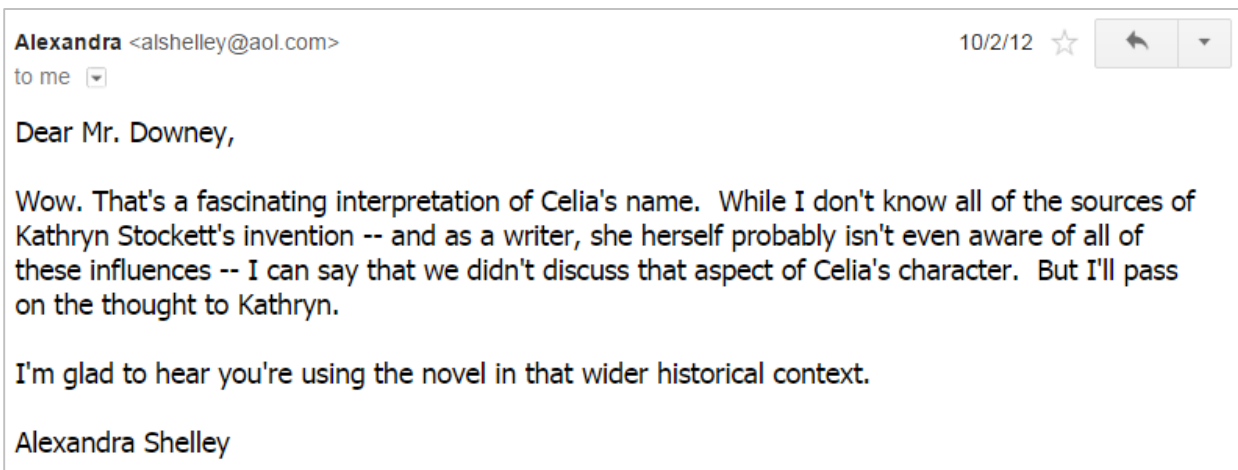
“Write’ of Passage” (3:00-4:00)

Students will share their favorite piece from the week in the form of a reading, providing a brief overview of what they like about the piece and answering questions from their peers.



You can see from the description above what an amazing week this turned out to be. Students were entirely empowered by it and produced work that was so very inspiring. If your school doesn't allow you the opportunity to take keen writers out of the classroom for an extended period of time, there are ways to implement a "Write of Passage" on a smaller scale. All that you need, really, is to be driven by the idea of giving students who love reading and writing an opportunity to feel like this is something they could do in their professional lives.

4. REACHING OUT TO SCHOLARS




The above email was in response to contextual research students and I conducted while studying Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. We came across a famous trial of a slave woman named "Celia" who was ultimately convicted and executed for the murder of her "master." Given our investigation of the circumstances surrounding Celia and her trial, the class began to wonder whether or not the character of Celia in Stockett's novel, played by Jessica Chastain in the film, was named for the historical figure.

I sent the above email to Alexandra Shelley, the publicist for Kathryn Stockett, and she was kind enough to reply. Although she wasn't able to answer our question, students seemed genuinely surprised that we got a response.


This, I think, is a powerful tool for educators in connecting our classrooms to the world around us. Students are always inspired when an author comes to visit, but they like the idea of reaching out and getting a response from someone they don't expect. It suggests to them, I think, that what they are doing in class is fundamentally important—which it is—and that this importance goes beyond what success in the classroom means for their report card.

Last year, as part of my Grade 11 English class, students gave presentations halfway through the year on one of the first three units of the course. One of my students, Kersti, decided that she would create a piece of visual art inspired by Margaret Atwood's poem, "Flying Inside Your Own Body," and then analyze both the poem and the work of art it inspired. The presentation was tremendous, and I blogged about it on www.comicsineducation.com, tweeting Atwood herself to come and check it out.





And that's precisely what she did. Lo and behold, when I checked my Twitter notifications the next day, I saw that she had retweeted the tweet as had a number of her followers. You can imagine the reaction of the student when she found out. Not only had she put together a great presentation on Atwood and received high praise from her peers, Atwood herself chose to share the work with her 600,000+ followers.

 **Comics in Education** @teachingcomics · Apr 5
Hi @MargaretAtwood. Check out the wonderful art inspired by your poetry at comicsineducation.com.


RETWEETS 19 FAVORITES 21








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


   


Reply to @teachingcomics @MargaretAtwood





 **Fernanda Cortes** @FeHaciente · Apr 5
@teachingcomics @MargaretAtwood great idea! My EFL 11th grade students would love to do something similar.


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


 **Suzannes** @teach22112 · Apr 5
@teachingcomics @MargaretAtwood beautiful! My 10th graders did this with watercolors. The same great results.


  1  1 





 **Glen Downey, Ph.D.** @GlenDowney · Apr 5
@teach22112 @teachingcomics Love to see them...maybe we can share on the site! Glen

 **Glen Downey, Ph.D.** @GlenDowney · Apr 5
@FeHaciente @teachingcomics Check out the visual brainstorming posts earlier too. It's a great activity: a kind of advanced brainstorming!

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 **Fernanda Cortes** @FeHaciente · Apr 5
@GlenDowney @teachingcomics thanks a lot! I'll check it!

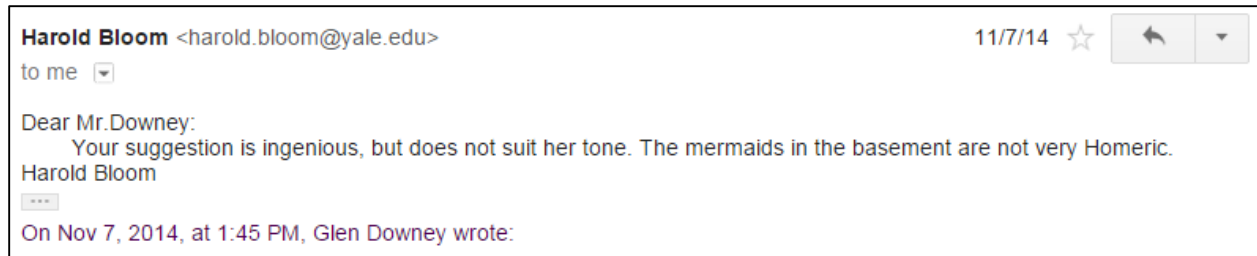
   

This year, in Grade 12, we explored a reading of Emily Dickinson’s poem, “I started Early, took my Dog,” the result of which was an email to three of the foremost literary critics in the world familiar with Dickinson’s work to ask them their opinion.

Now, we like to think of these critics as inaccessible—locked away in their ivory towers with no other interest in elementary and high school education than as that “thing” that makes students unprepared for university studies. Deep down you probably realize that this isn’t true, but sometimes it feels true.

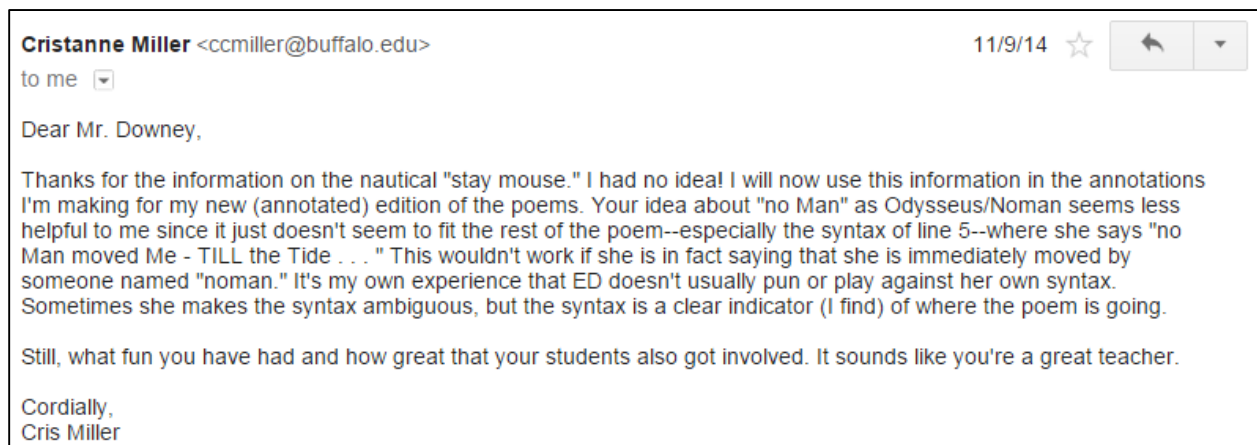
So who did I decide to email on a whim? Oh, just Sharon Cameron from Johns Hopkins, Cristianne Miller from CUNY-Buffalo, and Harold Bloom from Yale. Yes, that’s right, I emailed Harold Bloom about the goings-on of my high school English class.

And, of course, as *always* happens, Bloom was the first one to respond.



Yes, I know what you’re thinking. “He got Harold Bloom to call him `ingenious.’”

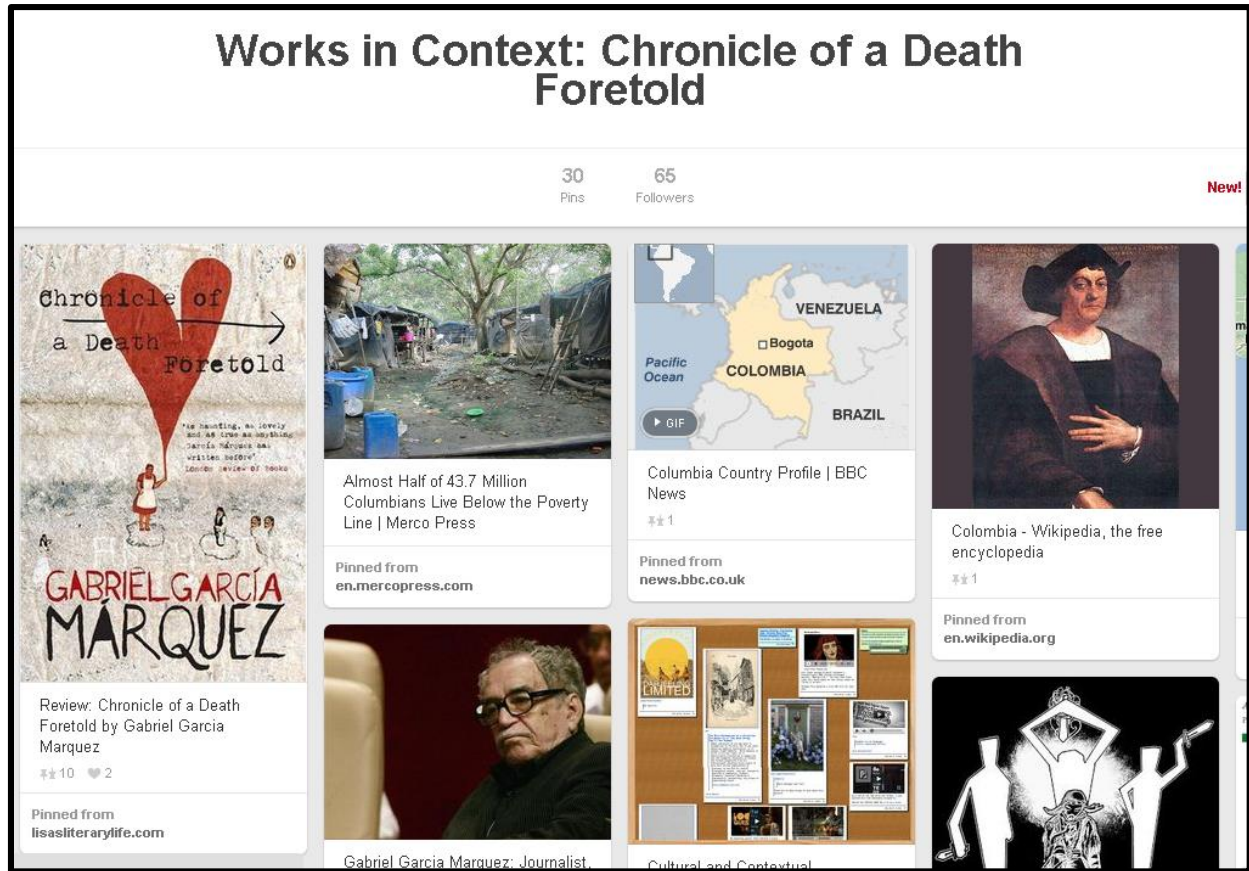
In fact, all three of the scholars responded, but it was Miller’s email that piqued the interest of the class:



What this means, of course, is that research and ideas that we did in class dealing with a poem by Emily Dickinson led to world-renowned Dickinson scholar thinking it scholarly enough and important enough to include in a new annotated edition of Dickinson’s work.

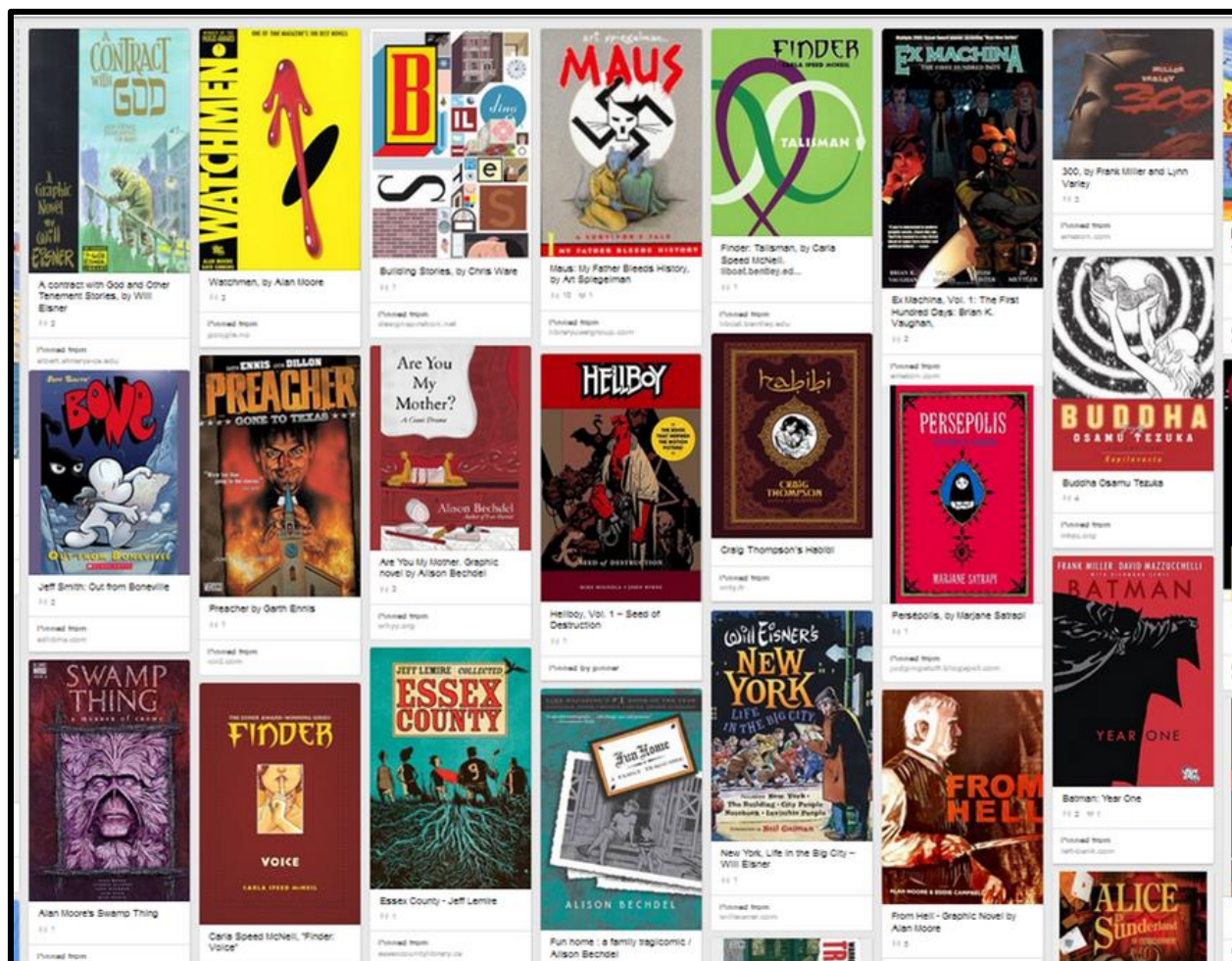
You can’t get more authentic and earn a larger degree of buy-in from an English/Language Arts class than when they see the work they are doing in class shaping and influencing the progress of literary scholarship.

3. USING VISUAL RESEARCH REPOSITORIES



Description: If human beings were originally hunter-gatherers, this activity must really tap into that because students take to it with enthusiasm. The idea is to give students a way of approaching research that is fun and engaging.

This activity gets students to build Pinterest boards for works they are studying. This can be an individual or communal project, but the basic idea is for students to have a visual repository of sources. When students research the internet and come across a good site for a book like, let's say, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, they take an image from the site and add it to a board they've created. There is something about the visual nature of Pinterest that piques students' curiosity, and makes them think that they are building a powerful database of sources. No longer merely a place for those who want to collect pin board after pin board of flower arrangements or dinnerware, Pinterest is now a powerful tool for research. Imagine the possibilities for your own classroom. Let's say, for instance, that you're doing a unit on visual narrative and want to give students a quick primer on some of the great comics and graphic novels that are being written. Why not have them do searches for comics and graphic novels on Pinterest? They'll literally find thousands of boards where people have pinned their favourite comics and graphic novels. I've even put together boards myself called Graphic Novels for Kids, Literacy Resources for Students, and The Best Graphic Novels of All Time.

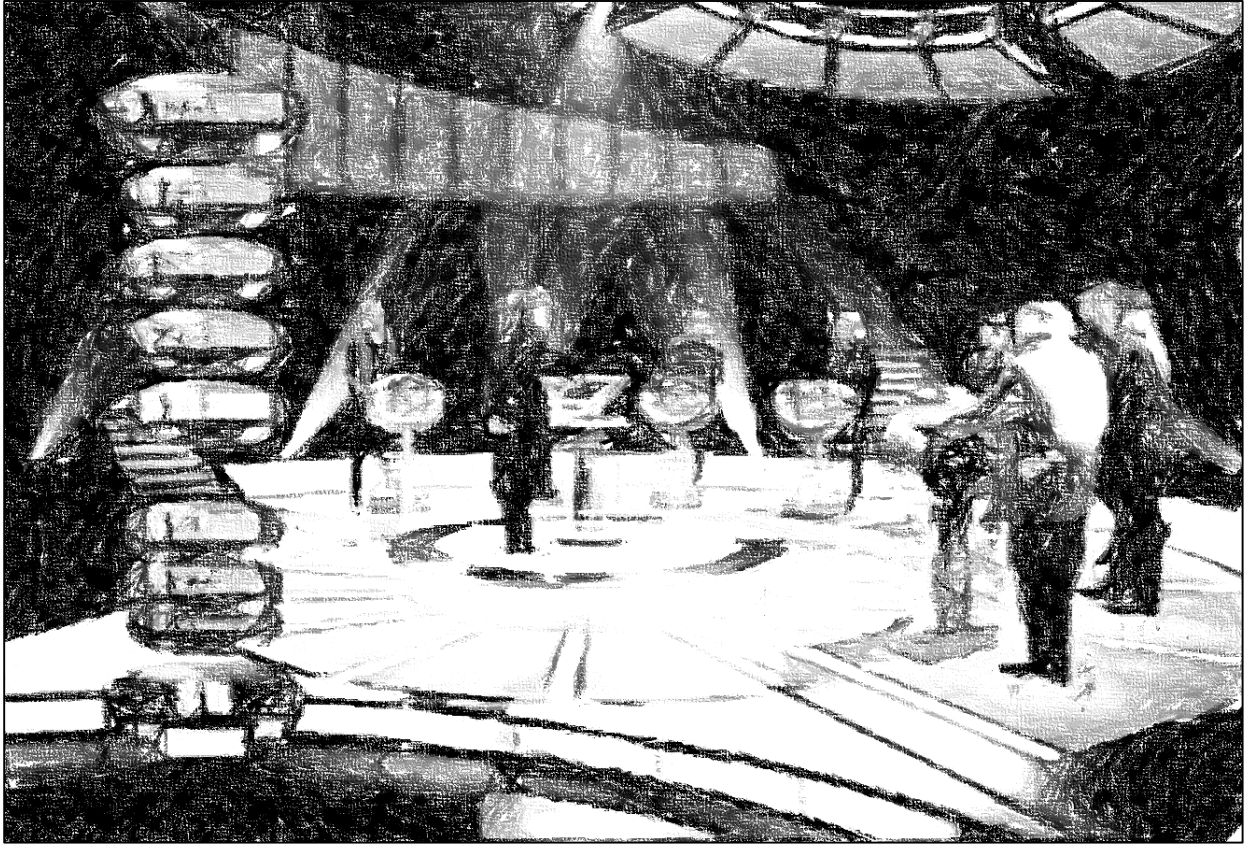


However, students can refine their searches as well in order to find, for instance, the comic or graphic novel they are studying. Perhaps the Pinterest image will take them to a website that might help them learn more about the work they are studying. If you're teaching the class, however, you can build your own boards and gather images that have links to great resources!

You've no doubt realized that this can be applied to subjects other than English or Language Arts. Imagine the Pinterest boards you can create to teach the history of war, the fundamentals of mathematics, or even something like the scientific method. Setting up an account on Pinterest is easy and its educative value has been acknowledged from a number of quarters. Check out the following!

- 37 Ways Teachers Should Use Pinterest <http://www.bestcollegesonline.com/blog/2012/02/05/37-ways-teachers-should-use-pinterest/>
- The Teacher's Guide to Pinterest <http://www.edudemic.com/guides/the-teachers-guide-to-pinterest/>
- 10 Ways to Use Pinterest in the Classroom <http://teachbytes.com/2012/03/10/10-ways-to-use-pinterest-in-the-classroom/>

2. USING POETRY AS A PSYCH EXPERIMENT



Description: As ominous as this sounds, this activity uses poetry to do something that students don't expect: make them care about poetry. As strange as it sounds, it manages to do just that, regardless of whether you're doing the activity with a group of middle schoolers or a group of education grads. Taking its name from the old game show, *The Weakest Link*, the activity uses a simple formula to show students the extent to which they can invest themselves in a poem.

In the activity, students are put into small groups of two or three students and given ten poems to examine. In the first round of the activity, students are given sufficient time to read all ten poems. However, once they've done this, they need to choose a poem that they feel, among the ten, is the weakest link: the one they'd like to be rid of. Each group gets a vote, and the poem with the most votes is the weakest link and voted out of the game. This same process takes place until there is only one poem left, which is the winner. Each time students eliminate a poem, the teacher reveals the poet who penned it. Sometimes the students know, but sometimes they don't.

When you do this activity, students won't immediately become invested in it. They'll participate and get rid of a couple of poems they don't like, but that will likely be the extent of it in the first couple of rounds. However, groups and especially individuals will soon become invested in one of the poems remaining, believing it to be better than the others. What happens next has to be seen to be believed. Students will become very possessive of their poem, becoming vocal about why it shouldn't be voted out, willing to strike deals with other groups to avoid it being eliminated, and even warning other groups

not to select it as the weakest link. Ultimately, students recognize that although they might not have identified themselves as being terribly interested in poetry to begin with, they can nonetheless become attached to, and find things to like in, a particular poem.

Here is a list I've used many times for this activity.

POEM 1

You fit into me
Like a hook into an eye.

A fish hook
An open eye.

POEM 2

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripener should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory:
But thou contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thy self thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel:
Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament,
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buriest thy content,
And, tender churl, mak'st waste in niggarding:
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.

POEM 3

One foot down, then hop! It's hot.
Good things for the ones that's got.
Another jump, now to the left.
Everybody for hisself.

In the air, now both feet down.
Since you black, don't stick around.
Food is gone, the rent is due,
Curse and cry and then jump two.

All the people out of work,
Hold for three, then twist and jerk.
Cross the line, they count you out.
That's what hopping's all about.

Both feet flat, the game is done.
They think I lost. I think I won.

POEM 4

The apparition of these faces in a crowd
Petals on a wet, black bough.

POEM 5

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfum'd sea,
The weary way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.
On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the beauty of fair Greece,
And the grandeur of old Rome.
Lo! in that little window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand!
The folded scroll within thy hand —
A Psyche from the regions which
Are Holy land!

POEM 6

in September, when
the s-h-i-v-e-r-i-n-g autumn wind
(silently) blows the leaves
into
a
pile
of colours
olive,crimson,gold

POEM 7

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I've known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

POEM 8

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

POEM 9

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

POEM 10


Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?
Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little lamb, I'll tell thee:
He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb.
He is meek, and He is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.
Little lamb, God bless thee!
Little lamb, God bless thee!

The octave seems to give him comfort. SESTET aka Longfellow has reversed things not so much comfort! aka Henry

What is the problem established in the octave? → coming to terms w/ loss in some ways though Wadsworth

I mean... what comfort does the sestet give Longfellow? This his burden is like Christ's?

Notice the abundance of religious imagery  CROSS FIRE MARTYR

we hear the flames in the "s"s at the end of the poem

notice the lengthening that the comma provides, caesura-like... the liquid & consonance too. accident

And remember, we're dealing with nothing more nor less than a terrible accident

→ snow is ever-returning so the cross never really goes away.

The Cross of Snow, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,
A gentle face--the face of one long dead--
Looks at me from the wall, where found its head
The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light*
Here in this room she died, and soul more white
Never through martyrdom of fire was led
To its repose; nor can in books be read
The legend of a life more benedict.
There is a mountain in the distant West
That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines
Displays a cross of snow upon its side.
Such is the cross I wear upon my breast
These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes
And seasons, changeless since the day she died.

repetition suggests this face is one that Long-fellow cannot avoid seeing... remembering

repetition and echoing of "long" but that's what memory is... an echoing

* Think we know why this poem reads so beautifully... it's the letter "L"

One of the most beautiful turns from octave to sestet → "There is a mountain in the distant west"

In the "west" of course because this is where the sun sets... where things end. This is an ancient idea of going "Into the West" See Tolkien ROTK

The cross/cross of snow" almost gives us a kind of mezzozeuqma (but not quite) "a cross of snow upon its side. / Such is the cross"

Only the 2nd "cross" takes the verb so no zeugma but still a strong connection between a physical cross and a metaphorical burden

Is the fire one which has irreparably singed, scarred him? It DID in fact.

"S" alliteration and consonance is overwhelming at the end

LET'S KEEP THE DIALOGUE GOING

Conferences like this are great. They give us some time to re-energize and think about all the wonderful things we can be doing with our students. However, once we leave the conference and get back to the day-to-day business of teaching kids, we can sometimes forget about how energized we were and all the great plans and good intentions we had. But why not keep the conversation going? If you have any questions about the activities discussed today, are interested in sharing resources, or want advice about how you might incorporate a particular lesson, please don't hesitate to contact me. I'm available in a variety of different print and electronic forms (we all are, these days) so please don't hesitate to get in touch. If you're interested in having someone come and talk to your faculty about the pedagogical utility of using what we've talked about in the classroom, just let me know. You can get a hold of me in the following ways:

	905-399-9680
	@GlenDowney or @teachingcomics
	www.facebook.com/glendowneyfansite
	www.comicsineducation.com
	downey.glen@gmail.com