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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2006 Volume III: Children's Literature, Infancy to Early Adolescence

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## **The Big Con: Tricking the High School Student into Writing a Research Paper**

Curriculum Unit 06.03.10, published September 2006  
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### **Introduction**

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Senior English students in Atlanta public schools are required to complete a senior research paper. Booker T. Washington High School has assigned a "career paper," which ends up reading like a fifth grade career report. While very appropriate for a communication skills or business technology class, the career paper is out of place in British and World Literature, and its lack of literary focus does little to prepare students for English "101" in college. I have tried to find a way to make the assignment a real research paper by having students examine a controversy within their chosen career, but my students find it hard to make the connections needed for higher level thinking. When completing the career assignment the student never really utilizes all facets of Bloom's Taxonomy. I wish to make the research paper more interesting while still addressing Bloom's dimensions and, more importantly, to create a paper more appropriate for seniors preparing to enter college.

### **Rationale**

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One of the most heartbreaking moments of my teaching career occurred when one of my graduated seniors emailed me from college to tell me she had failed her research paper in English "101". She said that she was very upset because she had worked hard in my class on her research paper and had received a high B from me. Her professor told her that her paper was very superficial and didn't show any insight into the topic. I was devastated, but not surprised. The powers that be at Washington High mandate that seniors complete a research paper, which makes up 10% of their final grade. This is a worthy assignment, but unfortunately the topic is careers.

A career paper is, in my opinion, appropriate for an eighth or ninth grader. It will help the student grasp the skills curriculum they will need for pursuing their chosen path. A high school senior who aspires to become a doctor is not well served when he finds out later that he needs 4-5 units of science and upper level math classes just to be considered for a premed program. In addition to being "too little, too late," the career paper is not remotely like the research papers assigned in college level English classes. It involves no powers of

interpretation and no great depth of research; the lion's share of information needed to complete the project can be found on one website, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics online. While research skills are used, a works cited page does not a research paper make.

After lamenting the plight of our students once they reach college, I received permission from our department chair and principal to rework the senior paper. While the AP students were doing a full-on literary research paper, they were still having great difficulty, and I knew my "regular" kids would need a transitional assignment to teach them the fundamentals of expounding on literary works. I still want my students to do the basic research needed for their future science and history classes, but I want them to be able to analyze a piece of literature with the ability the author intended for his or her readers to bring to bear. I want my students to be able to find others who agree with their contentions and also to see the point of view of those who disagree.

A study of folk stories from various cultures around the world is extremely appropriate for World literature, and when the syllabus is structured regionally instead of chronologically, the six to eight weeks spent on the research paper are continually relevant. While seniors respond well to creation stories and various other types of folk mythology, one character has consistently held their attention: the trickster.

According to Wikipedia online, a trickster is "a , goddess, spirit, human or anthropomorphic animal who plays or otherwise disobeys normal rules and norms of behaviour.<sup>1</sup> " With a description such as this it is not surprising that the trickster is a high school senior's favorite character. Any given day, a walk through the halls will reveal shirts with Bart Simpson holding a gun or stack of cash, Pacino as Scarface, any number of Looney Toon characters misbehaving, and even occasionally Sesame Street puppets (again, doing something unseemly). My school's culture reveres the con artist or anyone who can get one over on "the man". Why should I not use this fascination to further my agenda, the bulking up of these kids' brains? I have had no problem keeping students engaged when sharing various trickster tales during story time with children's books, having them write original tales in the style of a kid's book, and even staging performances of original trickster tale puppet shows. It therefore seems obvious to me that combining the trickster with my—and their—least favorite assignment, the dreaded research paper, could be a way to sugar-coat the pill.

Tricksters appear in folktales from almost all cultures. They can be varied in form, usually appearing as an animal, man or some combination thereof. Popular forms include, but aren't limited to, a spider-man, coyote, raven, rabbit or leprechaun. Tricksters are usually trying to pull one over on another character, usually a larger or "superior" creature. Often they get away with it; occasionally they are tricked in turn. The best of the tricksters, including the modern American incarnation—the confidence man—can trick a character out of a prize without said character realizing he's been had.

William Hynes and William Doty, in their introduction to *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts and Criticisms*, list several correspondences in regards to trickster's traits beginning with:

The fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster. Flowing from this are such features as deceiver/trick player, shape-shifter, situation-inverter, messenger/imitator of the gods, and sacred/lewd bricoleur.<sup>2</sup>

In Campbell Reesman's book Cristiano Grotannelli "supports this dualistic view of the trickster's creative consistency-and-irregularity: 'Prometheus is the ultimate example of the duplicity of tricksters; criminal and savior, guilty and heroic, impure and sacred, antagonist and mediator.'<sup>3</sup> My students eat these character

traits up. The trickster proliferates in modern culture in such various forms as Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner to Sawyer on ABC's *Lost* to the new animated film *Hoodwinked*. Students already know the character; they just don't know that they do.

Many trickster tales, mostly oral in tradition, share remarkably similar characteristics. A "gum man" appears in the South American story *Love and Roast Chicken*, a "tar baby" appears in the American slave tales of Brer Rabbit, and the southwestern United States character Coyote gets stumped by a lump of pitch<sup>4</sup>. For my students the recognition of these similarities leads to the realization that the stories traveled by way of the slave trade routes. With some having slave ancestors, my students really enjoy discussing the tradition of oral tales and the passing on of stories to preserve culture.

The trickster lends himself so well to the research project because he is everywhere in a rich literature. After students have a foundation of knowledge about the trickster and background on his stories they will be able to find him featured in literature as well as in subtle references. It is an exciting time for a teacher when the students start making the leaps without help. In her book on myth in American culture, Jeanne Campbell Reesman states: "writers in many traditions have made trickster an elusive but ever-present character in American literature." She also states that the trickster challenges "us to read across historical, cultural, and disciplinary divisions."<sup>5</sup>

As half of the senior English class consists of British literature, finding the trickster in Shakespeare and Chaucer becomes a fun challenge for the students. The trickster pops up in several of William Shakespeare's plays, including but not limited to, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, *As You Like It*, *A Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, and *The Taming of Shrew*<sup>6</sup>. The Trickster makes an appearance in several of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* such as "The Nun's Priest's Tale", "The Miller's Tale", "The Merchant's Tale", "The Pardoner's Tale", and "The Reeve's Tale" among others. "The Pardoner's Tale" and "The Reeve's Tale" are two excellent examples of the trickster getting tricked. My students love to see that death is the one tricking the three drunken rioters in "The Pardoner's Tale".

As we weave our way through World Literature, the trickster shows up in ancient Greek and Roman literature in the form of Hermes/Mercury. As we move forward in time we begin to study areas culturally and find a plethora of folk tales involving him as Iktomi and Coyote in the southwestern United States, Raven in the northwestern U.S., Monkey-King in Asia<sup>7</sup>, Anansi in western Africa, and Legba in the Caribbean<sup>8</sup>. If we have time we will culminate our study with a film depicting a modern confidence man, as in *Matchstick Men*.

In order for the research paper to address relevant standards, the structure will be the same for each student. The first part of the paper will address the trickster and trickster tale in general. This will allow for cooperative learning, as well as ease in using research facilities. Because Washington has a very weak media center, I inevitably spend two or three weekends at the downtown Atlanta Public Library helping students do their research. When several students can share the research materials, I find they stay at the library longer and find the assignment less isolating.

## Objectives

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### Main Objective

Students will research and compose an original research project which will prepare them for freshman level English at a four year university.

### For Research Project

Students will compose an original literature-based research paper utilizing the Modern Language Association citation format. Students will evaluate media to distinguish between scholarly or other appropriate sources and unsubstantiated opinion. Students will complete a thesis, introduction, bibliography cards, note cards, outline, and a rough draft.

Students will read a novel of their choice and identify trickster characters, identifying possible reasons for why the author chose this character. Students will compose a series of letters to the instructor concerning what they have read and how they feel about what they have read. Students will compare and contrast the trickster character of their piece of literature with the tricksters we study as a class. Students will research the background of the trickster and the culture(s) from which he comes; they will then make connections with the piece of literature they have read.

Students will present findings to the class utilizing all public speaking conventions. Students will create visual aides consisting of maps and artifacts of their chosen culture.

### For Supplemental Activities

Students will compose an original script for a trickster tale in the form of a puppet show. Students will create puppets utilizing various materials. Students will perform an original play incorporating the conventions of trickster stories.

## Strategies

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I plan to introduce the trickster unit to the students by sharing with them various trickster tales from around the globe. These stories will include Knutson's *Love and Roast Chicken*, Kimmel's *Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock*, MacDonald's *Please, Malese!*, and McDermott's Raven, Papagayo and Jabuti stories.

In the following days, a list of 40-50 books, plays, poems, and short stories will be available for the students to study, and by the end of the week they will have chosen their piece of literature. While we are examining the Ashanti culture and going through the research paper process, students will be reading and taking notes on their literary pieces. They will be identifying trickster characters in the pieces and doing research on the author. Earlier in the year we will have reviewed the conventional elements of literature, so students will know what to look for.

Over the next couple of weeks we will read a different Anansi trickster tale each day and take notes about the

relevant history, conventions, variations, and character motives involved. Also, we'll complete a brief cultural study of the Ashanti tribe in Western Africa. Basically, as a class we will complete the first part of the research paper together. Thanks to inclusion, the skill levels in an average senior English class may range from 3rd grade reading level to college level. This makes teaching a research paper a very difficult thing. Also, since it is not necessary to pass the previous year's English class before being promoted to senior English, many students have never acquired even the basic, fundamental research skills needed to complete a complex 8-9 page paper.

Owing to the very wide range of skill levels in each of my classes, some students will regurgitate what we discuss in class in their paper. Most of these students don't end up going to a four year university, so I don't feel that I'm robbing them of anything if they do nothing more sophisticated. At least they have gone through the motions of writing a research paper for any future schooling they may choose. I am usually fully aware of which of my students are headed to college because of information about them in surveys, prior writing assignments and many letters of recommendation. While I don't feel I can fairly require these students to research a different culture than that which we study in class, I will strongly encourage them to explore a different culture. As certain aspects of the rubric will be subjective, the student's willingness to rise to the challenge will be factored in.

Also, during this period students will be reading their choice of literature from my reading list. In order to monitor students' reading progress, we will exchange a series of letters—probably five or six—over three weeks' time. In each one to two page letter, students will tell me about major plot events and the characters to which they have been introduced. They will predict where they think the plot will go, and, if some sort of intrigue has arisen, they will determine character motives, including who the possible tricksters are and what role they will play. When we have done similar assignments in the past, the students have enjoyed rereading their letters after they have finished the books and seeing what assumptions were correct or off base and which predictions came to pass.

Three Saturdays during this period of time will be spent at the Auburn Avenue library of African American studies in downtown Atlanta. Acquiring a library card is a homework assignment the first week of school, so all children will have access to this fantastic resource. I will spend each Saturday from 10 a.m.-3 p.m. helping the students with the actual digging for research materials. In a perfect world the students could look up the books they need online prior to our Saturdays; however, internet is limited in my room and with temperamental computers it is easier to go through the research process at the actual library. I fax a copy of the assignment sheet and rubric to the librarian ahead of time so that students who work there on Saturdays get quality help. I help them locate the proper books needed, we sit at a large reserved table, and I help them write out bibliography citations and note cards. Since several students will not study African tricksters or pieces of literature, we will split our time between Auburn and the main downtown library, which also has an extensive reference collection.

## **Prewriting**

While all of this research is going on outside of class we will be preparing the thesis statement, bibliography cards, note cards, and outlines in class. Students will also be reviewing all punctuation rules and sentence structure rules. We will have a mini-lesson on commonly confused words and a fun spell check lesson similar to the one passed around through email.

### *The Thesis Statement*

As a class, we will read the first page of several sample research papers from all subjects and writing levels, and the students will identify the thesis statements. Up until now our students have been writing 5-8-8-8-5 essays and their thesis statements have been something like: If I went to Mars and could only bring one item with me it would be my computer so I could listen to music, play on the internet, and email all of my friends. While this passes as a thesis statement for a short, but not very good, essay, it lacks style. Style and voice are what we will work on over the next few days. Students will learn that in a research paper the thesis statement may take up several sentences. Parallel structure rules will be reinforced in this lesson. We will look at several research papers, written in various ways, that still convey relevant information.

### *Bibliography Cards*

Bibliography cards are one of the most important lessons we learn in preparing to write. Students learn that if they complete their bibliography/note cards in the proper format and number them appropriately, their works cited page will write itself and it will be very difficult to unintentionally plagiarize. Our bibliography cards are arranged as follows: upper right corner, number in numerical order starting with the first source you find; bottom left corner, location of the source, e.g., Washington Park Library; bottom right corner, call number; and middle body, an MLA citation of the book, article or website. This is the time when we focus on appropriate sources. The students and I usually surf the internet looking for sites on aliens. We evaluate the sites on how realistic they seem and then search to find out who put them on the web. When the students see that Joe Blow from Podunk touts his site as the definitive work on alien life on this planet, they get the point. We look at the suffixes of web addresses and what they mean by looking up [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) and [whitehouse.com](http://whitehouse.com). That also drives home the point of misinformation on the web as well as distinguishing between an article and an advertisement. I am with them for the trips to the library, so evaluating books and articles takes place on a one on one basis. Students will be required to turn in twenty bibliography cards.

### *Note Cards*

It is very important that the lesson on note cards immediately follow that on bibliography cards; otherwise students run the risk of misnumbering the cards. Each note card should be filled out as follows: upper right corner, the note card number—this should correspond with the number on the upper right of the bibliography card source in which you took the note; upper left corner, a brief summary of contents of card, e.g., "trickster as cultural hero"; bottom right, page number from which note was taken; and middle body, an appropriately punctuated note or paraphrase. It is vital that students understand the logic behind numbering both sets of cards. They sometimes find it difficult to grasp that they may have ten note cards with the number 12. This system of numbering makes the works cited page easy to do. Students will be required to turn in fifty note cards.

### *The Outline*

After completing their statement of controlling purpose, the students will use their note cards to assemble their outlines. We move desks out of the way and the students spread out on the floor, and occasionally the hall, and then "deal" their note cards. Students group their cards in the order assigned in the assignment sheet (parts one, two and three) and then in the subdivisions that make sense to them. We have previously studied the outline format of Roman numerals, letters and numbers; students are now just "writing" the outline on the floor with their note cards. Outlines become a lot easier when the students can move around their ideas in space. Revisions become painless because nothing has to be rewritten; they simply move the card to a new place. Also, seeing their cards laid out next to each other helps the students to evaluate which cards have valuable information and which contain filler. They are only required to use 15 of their cards in the

actual paper, and the outline process is usually the point at which they make their decisions on which to use. Once they have found a series of ideas that makes sense to them (and me, since I am making the rounds), students transfer the ideas to a sheet of paper under the proper numeral or letter. If we have time, I will make loose Roman numerals, numbers, and lower case letters that they can manipulate along with their cards.

## **The Research Project**

### *Part One*

The students will then begin on their research paper, following their outlines. The questions they need to answer in their paper are already answered in their properly ordered note cards. This will largely be completed outside of school. The paper will consist of three main parts: the trickster background, the specific cultural background of the trickster, and the literary analysis of a piece of literature featuring a trickster. All of this information is given to the students in the initial assignment sheet; therefore, they know what to research. In the first section, after the introduction, students will look at the character of the trickster in general. Each student will answer fundamental questions such as:

What is a trickster? What makes a trickster tale?

How is the trickster a culture hero? What did he "do" for humanity? How can a trickster tale act as a creation myth?

What are the trickster's various motivations for his actions?

How do trickster tales vary by culture? What similarities do they share? How did these similarities come to exist?

Describe the evolution of the trickster. Where can he be found today? What forms of media are used to share his stories?

### *Part Two*

The second part of the paper will be the breakdown of one particular culture's trickster mythology and folklore. The students will be free to choose a culture that interests them. "Culture" will remain a loose term, so it can be adapted for students of various levels. A less adept student may find it easier to write broadly on one Asian trickster while another may find it easier to focus on the Ashanti or Tsimshian.

Who is the trickster or tricksters? Is he a deity, animal, human?

Is he based on a real animal or person?

Describe this culture. How are his stories passed on? How old are they?

Is he original to this culture or was he brought from another?

These are just a few of the questions students will be able to answer. This portion of the paper should cover two to three pages.

### *Part Three*

The third portion of the paper will include a two to three page literary analysis of a character from the student's selected work. The student will identify the trickster in a piece of literature and will address possible motives for his/her actions, the relevance of these actions in relation to the plot, possible reasons the author chose to use a trickster, and similarities in plotlines or actions of characters to the myths we've read in class. The trickster found in our classroom literature does not (and probably won't) match up with the student's studied culture. This last part of the paper serves as preparation for college literary analyses.

Papers will be 8-10 pages in length and only 12 point, Times New Roman will be accepted. Students will include a cover page and a copy of their rubric in the back. Neatness will be a rubric dimension, so papers should be in a transparent presentation folder.

Students are informed of the paper due date on their syllabus. There is also a countdown calendar on the wall so they are always kept abreast of how many months, weeks, or days are left. The students sign a contract when the project is first introduced informing them (it is also on their syllabus) of the 10% weight towards their final grade and the fact that their papers will, under no circumstances, be accepted late. Papers will not be accepted after 11:59 p.m. on the due date. A hard copy is due to me on the due date unless the student is absent, in which case they must send it electronically before 11:59 p.m. He or she may then bring the hard copy the following school day. Absence from school is not an excuse and only a death in the family, with proof, or a hospitalization, again with proof, will gain the child a reprieve.

These parameters may seem harsh for high school students, but I find stringent deadlines help prepare them for the "real world" where excuses are rarely taken into consideration and you are almost never given a second chance at a job. Atlanta's population of students has been living in a culture of entitlement, and that stops when they get to my class. Before I required them to sign contracts, I would receive over half of the papers late. I would take off ten points per day that the paper was late. When the highest score is usually a high B and most average in the C or D range, the median score would then be in the 50s. That did not work. This is what works for me.

### *Presentations*

After completing the papers, students will present their masterpieces to the rest of the class. If it is available, we will use the teaching theatre. Students will place key points on note cards (to avoid merely reading their papers aloud) and present to their classmates. After the formality of the paper, the presentations will be less rigid. Presentations will be ten to twelve minutes in length and all conventions of public speaking will be followed. Students will be required to have two visual aides. The first will be either a found or homemade artifact from the culture they studied. The second will be a poster board containing a map of the country or region studied, a representation of the studied trickster and a biography of the author of the literary piece critiqued. All key points of the papers will be touched upon. All domains of Bloom's Taxonomy will have been addressed after the presentations, and lessons will really be driven home when students present their research to the others in the class. This activity is designed to help the researcher remember his/her research and serves as an overview of cultures, tricksters, and literary works for the rest of the class.

### **Supplemental Activities**

While the research paper, after the introduction and bibliography card/note card/outline process, is an outside assignment, various tie-ins can keep the students interested and focused in the classroom. I will continue to share children's books that feature a trickster. Also, they have so much fun with the puppet shows that it is an activity I am loathe to skip. To share their found stories with the rest of class, groups will perform the stories



using paper bag characters. The puppet show is a great decompression activity after the length and weight of the research paper. The paper counts as 10% of their final grade and really stresses the students out. A few days of scripting, making puppets, and rehearsing the tales keep the students engaged in their cultural study but relaxes them. The two days we spend watching the plays are a pure joy.

## Classroom Activities

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### The Introductory Book Share Day

Materials needed: Books listed in Student Bibliography and any others that are relevant.

Objective: Students will identify various tricksters in various cultures by reading a selection of short stories and sharing the tales with their classmates.

Students will be introduced to various trickster tales by reading a selection of stories. These stories will include Knutson's *Love and Roast Chicken*, Kimmel's *Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock*, MacDonald's *Please, Malese!*, and McDermott's Raven, Papagayo and Jabuti stories.

Students will be seated in three or four desk "islands" and a few books will be on each "island". Students will, as a small group, read the stories together and then share with the rest of the class. After reading and sharing these introductory stories, each group will note key characters and plot points. They will identify whether or not the trickster succeeded in his ploy, his motives for the ploy, and the methods he used to trick his victim. We will then discuss, as a group, the similarities and differences between the stories and characters.

### A Sample Library Session

Materials: A library, blank note cards.

Objective: Students will utilize a library to research their various cultures and to do a literary search on their chosen piece of literature.

My classes do their library research on Saturdays, so preparation may be different if you have a school library to use. Students are polled before the weekend to find out who can come which Saturday and a rudimentary schedule is made. Prior to arriving, students know to bring all supplies with them (so I don't have to); we also go over appropriate library behavior, including the librarian's role in their research. I send the reference librarian a copy of the assignment sheet and book lists when we begin the paper so she can help students who can't make it on a weekend. I try not to have more than ten kids with me at one time; otherwise very little individual attention is possible.

Typically I will pull books like the CLC literary criticism encyclopedias for recent years so I can show a whole group how to find their author in the index and write down the volumes they'll need before going into the stacks. Once students have found the books they need we shuttle back and forth in twos to the stacks. Most students have never done literary criticism before and the reference section is unfamiliar to them. Showing them how to use the reference section, how to find the needed books, and how to find the information within multi-volume works takes up the majority of my time.

To help students do a search for their cultures and tricksters we use the librarian to help us search the library holdings. The students are used to this type of research and don't need the same kind of individual instruction as with literary research. I break the kids up into groups of two and we do the appropriate searches with the librarian's assistance. Then I take the kids to the stacks to retrieve the books while the librarian helps another group do their search. The librarian is an invaluable resource and she appreciates that I inform her of the project before showing up with a group of ten kids. Prior to my weekend trips, Atlanta Public Schools brought the entire senior class to the library at once. Needless to say, no one got much work done when 300 students were vying for the same resources and instruction.

After we have retrieved books I work with everyone at the tables on completing their note cards and bibliography cards. The students have learned how to do these in class but don't always remember when faced with several books spread in front of them. Students are encouraged to work together and to share their resources. Since a good portion of the paper will contain common research, the students who work together can knock out this portion of the research in one sitting.

Galileo and other online references are available to the kids through our media center's website, so we learn how to search those in the classroom. Students are discouraged from doing their internet research during library time, as it can be done at school. They know they should take full advantage of their library time, especially when they learn they cannot check out reference materials.

These weekend library sessions have worked very well for me. They give an opportunity for me to get to know the kids outside of school and for them to see me in a relaxed setting, and this eases some of the stress of the research paper. It also gives the students a "real life" sample of college life, as they are doing exactly what they will have to do for a college research paper (minus the teacher). It is kind of a training program for study outside the classroom. This year I may skip one Saturday and instead have a weeknight session to accommodate weekend workers. I have found that the students who spend the time with me in the library do not plagiarize, write better papers, and have greater understanding than those who do not come.

### **An Original Trickster Play**

Materials: Paper lunch sacks, various decorative notions, glue, scissors, a "stage" (a table with a sheet over it works for us), microphone (a cheap Radio Shack version plugged into a tape player works well)

Objective: Students will demonstrate comprehension of themes in trickster literature and conventions in this type of mythology by composing and performing an original trickster play.

This activity takes about a week and is the perfect ending for the unit; as I teach seniors, I make it the final project of the year as it holds their attention during "senioritis". On day one students are placed in groups according to the region they studied in their research paper. Each group should have three to five members. Students are asked to write a twelve to fifteen minute play that contains some of the conventions from the tales we've read. Each play should contain one clear trickster, with his/her scheme to trick someone, who then either gets away with it or is tricked in the process. Students should spend two to three days writing and practicing their plays. To save the kids' time, I run off a finished script for each member of the group. After the scripts are completed, students will make puppets of their characters out of paper lunch sacks (socks, paint stirring sticks, and milk cartons also work well). The performances will take a day or two, depending on class size. A long table is covered with a sheet so several students can sit behind it and act out their play. I use a microphone set up on the floor under the table to amplify voices. We make a big production out of the performances. I provide popcorn and film the plays. When it is timed so that this is the last assignment before

finals, the kids really go all out. It ends the semester on a high note.

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