YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE
to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2019 Volume I: Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay

The Death of the Five Paragraph Essay: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay in Middle School

Curriculum Unit 19.01.01, published September 2019
by Brandon Barr

Introduction and Rationale

Mark Twain Elementary School is a Chicago Public School located on the southwest side of the city. The student population served by the school is roughly 83% low income and ranges from grades pre-K to 8th grade. The population is also roughly 84% Latino and 12% White. Students that are diverse learners account for roughly 10% of the student population, and roughly 16% of the students in the school receive additional supports as part of Twain's bilingual program.[1] This three-week unit is designed for about 130 sixth grade general education students to be taught towards the end of the school year after several cycles of essay writing and wide reading across a variety of genres appropriate for sixth grade students**.** Many of these students are not proficient writers as they enter sixth grade and struggle to compose writing that reflects the language of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

This unit will complement the work that is expected of students in other units throughout the school year. This unit will come after a unit I wrote titled *Playing with Poetry* which has students write a variety of original poems, deeply exploring writer's craft. My students and I will consider how prose writers make similar craft decisions after introducing students to the genre characteristics of profile and personal experience essays. Students will read two of each type of essay, discussing the craft choices that authors make along the way. Finally, mirroring seminar as closely as possible, students will have the choice to write a profile or personal experience essay.

For each unit I write, my school requires a series of essential questions and enduring understandings to frame each unit of study for my students. This creates a sense of shared inquiry and a focused approach when starting new instructional units. The essential questions and enduring understandings for this unit are provided. Both the essential questions and enduring understandings would be posted in my classroom and be continually revisited as the unit is taught.

Essential Questions

- What are the genre characteristics of a profile and personal experience essay?
- What should we look for in the writing of professional authors of profiles and personal experience essays to influence our own writing?

Enduring Understandings

- Both profiles and personal experience essays are types of creative nonfiction writing. A profile is shortened form of a biography that uses interview, anecdote, observation, description and analysis to make a public point about an individual. A personal experience essay is autobiographical in nature; the reader should have a good idea about the inner thoughts and feelings of the person based on the personal/conversational tone that the writer takes.
- In the writing of others, we should be alert to the author's craft. This means that writers think of the choices they can make to get their writing to look or sound a certain way. Some craft choices that writers can make in literary nonfiction relate to word choice, imagery, description, essay structure, use of anecdotes, and constructing a public point in a seamless manner.

Content Objectives

The Five Paragraph Essay

The title of this unit is *The Death of the Five Paragraph Essay: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay in Middle School.* The five-paragraph essay is a common structure that is taught to students to help them organize their ideas and to make arguments. In this type of essay, the introduction serves as a funnel of thinking that ends with the thesis statement. The thesis statement acts as an umbrella statement that controls the content of the essay; many times, the thesis outlines three topics to be argued or explored in each of the body paragraphs. Each of three body paragraphs explores one point that is directly tied to the thesis of the introduction. In each body paragraph, relevant facts or figures are explored in the order they were presented in the thesis statement in the introduction. The last paragraph of the essay, the conclusion, seeks to go in the reverse direction of the introduction. It starts narrow by revisiting the thesis and leaving the reader with something to think about related to the topic addressed.[2] Many argue that this structure can be useful as a mode of writing, but others make compelling claims that have caused me to reconsider the practice in my classroom. In seminar, Professor Brantley recalled being taught the five-paragraph format in the form of a keyhole as a freshman in high school. She described learning the practice as being useful in a limited way and suggested to proceed with instructional caution when teaching it as a form.[3] This structure can be useful as a temporary scaffold to help writers.

In the book *Why They Can't Write*, John Warner, makes a compelling argument that has caused me to reconsider my reliance on this practice. Warner is a college professor, and his argument is that the students that he has had have gaps in their writing because they were taught incorrectly. He contends that there are several reasons why students write in a manner that is deficient, but the heart of his argument is that students are "conditioned" to perform "writing-related simulations," which pass temporary muster but do little to help students develop their writing abilities."[4] Warner contends that the five paragraph structure disengages students from the writing process because of its lack of authenticity. He argues that it creates passive learners that are looking to follow rules instead of thinking critically and making the types of choices that writers struggle with while crafting writing. This is problematic, as the form does not allow for students to engage in productive struggle; all the roadblocks have been removed and the process of writing becomes an exercise in slot-filling the proper information. Warner's argument boils down to this: students deciding on the

form and organization an essay should take is a form of deep learning. Zinsser (2006) says it a couple of different ways when he notes, “every writer must follow the path that feels comfortable” and “good writing is good writing, whatever form it takes.”[5] Teachers shouldn’t rob students of the chance to compose for authentic audiences, to figure out what path is comfortable and to deliberate over what form their writing should take. Teachers need to build student toolboxes with knowledge of craft choices for them to write like authors.

Literary Nonfiction Writing

In the *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* Seminar, the Fellows and Seminar Leader discussed the qualities of good writing. During our discussion, we developed a short list of attributes that we felt were traits of good writing: does it make me change my mind? Does it challenge my thinking? Is it crafted to make me feel a certain way? Does the writing use a form that is clear and easy to follow? Has the language the author used been worked to sound nice? Is it engaging?[6] Zinsser (2006) makes several observations about good writing that confirm the short list that Fellows devised in seminar. He observes that good writing is intentional in bearing information and presents it with “vigor, clarity and humanity.”[7] Zinsser firmly believes that nonfiction is the vehicle for most people learning how to write because it allows students and young people to write about their own lives and interests. He also observes the importance of motivation, saying that it is “at the heart of writing.”[8] By writing about their own life and interests, students may be easily motivated to embark in sustained writing.

While literary nonfiction can be traced as far back as Montaigne, there was a surge of interest in literary genre as the 20th century progressed.[9] Zinsser (2006) traces this evolution from a focus on fiction towards literary nonfiction. He notes that historically, at the start of the 20th century that Americans had access to fiction by means of the “Book-of-the-Month Club” that would send out fiction to individuals. World War II slowed this demand for fiction, as the war effort and the advent of the television introduced people to “new places, and issues and events.” The Book-of-the-Month crowd then wanted nonfiction, and other mediums like magazines needed to follow suit; Zinsser argues that nonfiction became the new “American literature.”[10]

The Writer’s Toolkit for Literary Nonfiction Writing

A study of literary nonfiction requires careful attention to heighten student awareness of the craft choices that authors make. This type of writing may have students focusing on topics, people and events that they are intimately familiar with and can write about with great volume and little research. As I was drafting my own literary nonfiction piece for seminar to workshop, I found character sketches to be easy to write given the individuals that I was writing about were so vivid in my memory. This may not be a skill that students know they have and may require practice before expecting them to be able to incorporate them into a piece. Norquist (2018) notes that character sketches should not be dry or just descriptive, they can also entertain or praise the subject; character sketches can capture “facts, traits, idiosyncrasies and accomplishments of a subject… [as well as capture] the subject's personality, appearance, character or accomplishments.”[11] A link to a template is provided in the teacher resource section that can be modified to support all the different aspects that students might want to consider as they grapple with crafting descriptions of individuals in their writing.

Another craft element that is relied on heavily in drafting literary nonfiction is the use of description. Ferriss (2007) recalls a quote from John McPhee [a writer known for his literary nonfiction and a teacher that Ferriss had] who observed, “A thousand details add up to one impression.”[12] This line speaks to the power of building

detail to capture the essence of an individual. Literary nonfiction relies on anecdote, description and reflections to build an impression of topic. In this respect, writing literary nonfiction may be markedly different from the type of writing that is usually expected from students. Rather than follow a traditional narrative progression, literary nonfiction relies on a variety of organic structures that often deviate from or interrupt a continuous sequence of events. These details, when carefully crafted by means of word choice, description, and positioning, have the effect of a reader assembling a puzzle that ultimately reveals a cohesive picture of a person, place or memory.

An additional genre convention that we focused on in seminar was that literary nonfiction should have a public point. Ferris (2007) quoted a similar observation from McPhee while in his class, "A piece of writing needs to start somewhere, go somewhere, and sit down when it gets there."[13] In seminar, we discussed several professional essays as well as essays that were produced by Fellows and workshopped. In our discussions, we noticed that there were times that it was difficult to identify a public point. Sometimes the group noted there were multiple public points.[14] At any rate, it is important to address this concept with students before they begin to write. Without a public point, the reader is left with a piece that essentially just a narrative. Getting back to the advice that McPhee dispenses and what we also touched on in seminar, the public point should not feel tacked on to a piece. Professor Brantley observed that one goal to avoid in drafting would be to tell a narrative and then attach a moral or lesson to the end. This predictable structure doesn't allow for the extended focus and connection that McPhee is calling for in his observation. As noted in seminar, the public point should help students to recognize that they are no longer writing for just the teacher, that the writing they are engaging in should be able to exist beyond the classroom.[15] By envisioning a larger audience, students engage in critical reflection to weave a public point into a piece.

One element of craft that literary nonfiction has in common with the craft choices that poets make is the use of highly worked and reworked language that could be considered writing for the ear. In seminar, many of the professional pieces as well as the pieces that Fellows developed worked with language to create a sense of rhythm and poetic cadence at the paragraph and sentence levels. Many students that I have taught over the years associate looking for this in poetry, but do not actively look for it as much in prose. Zinsser (2006) advises the following when considering the craft of capturing voice in writing: avoid "breeziness and condescension and clichés."[16] Zinsser goes on to give an example from E.B. White that uses economy and careful diction choices to serve as an example of how to avoid pitfalls in voice:

> I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way around and none left to do the accounting. [17]

Then Zinsser reimagines that same opening if someone is "breezy" and attempting to achieve a casual tone but instead "littered the path with obstacles, cheap slang, shoddy sentences and windy philosophizing:"

> Ever stay up late babysitting for a sick porker? Believe you me, a guy can lose a heckuva lot of shut-eye. I did that gig for three nights back in September and my better half thought I'd lost my marbles. (Just kidding, Pam!) Frankly, the whole deal kind of bummed me out. Because, you see, the pig up and dies on me. To tell you the truth, I wasn't feeling in the pink myself, so I suppose it could have been yours truly and not old Porky who kicked the bucket. And you can bet your

bottom dollar Mr. Pig wasn't going to write a book about it![18]

The difference between both paragraphs would be evident even to my students. One is windy, folksy, and filled with clichés while the other gets the reader to think about the relationship between the individual and the pig with plain and economical language and formal grammar. Zinsser suggests reading a piece aloud to see whether writing sounds more like the first paragraph than the second; if it sounds like the second paragraph, revise to simplify it.[19]

Personal Experience Essays

Personal experience essays are an interesting genre to explore with students, as it is a form that can be explored with increasing sophistication as a student progresses in school. In primary grades for instance, it is not uncommon for teachers to focus on teaching a beginning, middle and end to tell a personal story. It may include a picture to further illustrate characterization and setting. In the intermediate/middle school grades, students learn about the parts of plot, how to craft characters and settings that create imagery for the reader. By high school, the chronological nature of story-telling can be inverted, use of anecdote is encouraged, and the writing may take on more of a reflective tone. By the time a student is in high school, mastering this genre of writing is critical as many colleges and universities pose prompts that require students to engage in this type of writing to either be admitted or gain financial aid awards. It is extremely beneficial to explore the different craft choices that are available to a writer in this genre in discussions of professional pieces to select texts that might serve as appropriate models.

In his book *On Writing Well*, Zinsser (2006) makes several key observations about the personal experience essay, which he refers to as memoir. He notes the importance of not writing to please others. Given the personal nature of the writing, Zinsser argues that writing about oneself should not require 'permission,' that the details associated with the "people, places, events, anecdotes, ideas, [and] emotions" should be written about with confidence and pleasure. He later observes that that memoir writing takes us back to intense periods of our lives; these intense periods provide the reader a "window into a life" rather than a complete summary of a life. He continues to argue that this type of writing is pieced together; which speaks to many of the craft choices that authors must make when writing in this genre. Zinsser makes a special point to highlight the importance of details like sounds, smells, songs, as well as men, women and children that have been part of an individual's life as sources of detail to weave into a memoir. The act of writing a memoir requires the writer to make many editorial choices of what details to include, to elaborate, or to distill. In addition to detail, the tone of this type of writing balances a tension of narrating a story from the past while maintaining an older, potentially wiser voice looking back in time. Zinsser sums up this tone best by asking the following question: "what did that man or woman learn from the hills and valleys of life?"[20] Addressing this question while writing a memoir requires a writer to weave detail and reflection in careful ways.

Examples of Craft in Personal Experience Essays

In seminar, we have read several essays that would qualify as personal experience essays. We explored some of the decisions that authors made in their writing that speak to the effort that must be invested to negotiate narrating the past event and reflecting on it within the same piece. For example, one text that we read for seminar was Frederick Douglass's "Learning to Read." In this literacy narrative, we learn about how Douglass navigates a system that actively attempted to prevent him from learning how to read. In reading about his experiences, we learn about Douglass's life as a slave as well as the impact of slavery as an institution on

several types of individuals. This includes learning about his mistress, who starts off as a kindly individual that supports his desire to learn to read only to become one of his largest obstacles.[21] Through Douglass's use of anecdote describing this individual, the reader can learn how slavery impelled individuals who had the capacity to do good towards others to instead attempt to actively harm someone, just because he was a slave:

> My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another.... Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman.... Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tigerlike fierceness.[22]

This character sketch uses metaphor to get the reader to think about slavery's impact on both the enslaver and enslaved in a nuanced way. Saying her tender heart became stone and comparing her change from lamblike to being tigerlike shows that institution of slavery harmed more than the slaves. When thinking of slavery, most people tend to focus on the physical or emotional harm done to slaves. In this instance, Douglass demonstrates the insidious nature of slavery. By sustaining this system, slavery corrupted someone who would otherwise do good towards others.

Another aspect of personal experience essay that is a significant craft decision in the Douglass essay is his description of the white boys that he encounters and befriends to learn how to read. Besides demonstrating his ability to navigate an oppressive system, Douglass's use of anecdote paints a picture of the class structure between slaves like Douglass and poor whites while also playing with language when he makes the following observation:

> As many of these [white children] as I could, l converted into teachers. With their kindly aid... I finally succeeded in learning to read.... I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. [23]

The language and description that description that Douglass uses here is specific and carries deep meaning. In this section of the text, Douglass almost feels pity for the white children who have less to eat than him as a slave. He selects the word "urchins" to describe them, meaning that they appeared poor and dressed poorly. Douglass's narration of how he took advantage of their hunger to satisfy his own literary hunger demonstrates the layers of power that slaves had to navigate to survive. His diction choice of the word "bread" carries multiple meanings in this passage. For the white children, the bread is very literal. It is much-needed food to satisfy hunger. Douglass has a similar hunger, but his was a hunger for knowledge. His actions in the passage dictate that the hunger he felt to learn was as urgent as the poor white boys to eat. Douglass's deep desire to learn despite his circumstances are evident because of use of language. This passage provides a lot of nuance beyond the general conceptions that many individuals have about slavery.

Another personal experience essay that we explored in seminar is "On Dumpster Diving." In this essay, the

author of the text builds the reader's technical knowledge of going into dumpsters to look for food and valuable materials. There are elements in this essay that demonstrate powerful craft choices the author made that help the reader to visualize the narrator's life experiences. This essay, while technical and extremely informative, also uses the first person.[24] By making that choice at the start of the essay, Eigher invites the reader along on his journey into his dumpster world and that reader is encouraged to think about his lifestyle from the author's perspective.

> I am a scavenger. I think it a sound and honorable niche, although if I could I would naturally prefer to live the comfortable consumer life, perhaps- and only perhaps- as a slightly less wasteful consumer, owing to what I have learned as a scavenger…. I have learned much as a scavenger. I mean to put some of what I learned down here, beginning with the practical art of Dumpster diving and proceeding to the abstract. [25]

Looking at this text, Eigher anticipates that the reader probably has stereotypes of individuals who go into dumpsters. In the opening of the text, he works to paint himself in a noble light. The idea is that if there is something to learn from an individual that goes into dumpsters, then there is something to learn and value from everyone. He also values living simply. In this respect, Eigher's ideas harken back to individuals like Whitman who celebrates the common man and Thoreau who values living simply. He is elevating an activity that the reader doesn't anticipate ever seeing elevated; it forces the reader to reassess the action of diving in dumpsters. He equates it in the next paragraph as "something of an urban art."[26] This elevation of his action is very engaging before he goes into what a dumpster diver needs to know.

Eigher also uses humor effectively. In paragraph 8, he focuses on what separates the "bohemian type" from the "professionals," who are defined by eating from the dumpsters.[27] Implicit in this comparison, he posits himself as a professional which helps to establish himself as a credible figure to speak about dumpster diving as an art. Eigher comes back to the professionals at the end of the essay who do not dumpster dive like him and makes a public point.

> Now I hardly pick up a thing without envisioning the time I will cast it aside. This is a healthy state of mind…. Between us [the wealthy and Eigher] are the rat-race millions who nightly scavenge the cable channels looking for they know not what. I am sorry for them.[28]

Eigher's tone is important here. He is getting at the idea that if the reader was going to feel pity towards him for dumpster diving, that the pity was misdirected. That there are multiple parties to feel pity for in the essay, the government workers, the middle class, the parents of college students, but not the dumpster divers. This leads someone to think about the value of material goods and consumerism. If Eigher is comfortable with his lot in life, who is the reader to judge? His experience lets us into his world to understand, but the message he is hoping to communicate is carefully controlled at the end. He doesn't want pity; he is okay. The public point is powerful because it is surprising; it goes against society's conventions about what and individual should have to lead a comfortable life.

Profiles

The profile as a genre is interesting because of its intense focus on one subject. Nordquist (2018) defines

profile as “a short exercise in biography--a tight form in which interview, anecdote, observation, description, and analysis are brought to bear on the public and private self.”[29] Students are introduced to biography in fifth grade at our school. One of their research projects in fifth grade is to write a short biography of someone that they admire, so they possess some of the requisite skill needed to write a profile. But further unpacking Nordquist’s definition, students do not enter sixth grade with the knowledge to be able to weave interview, anecdote, observation, and description in ways that differentiate biography and profile. In discussing the readings before students write, it will be important to focus discussion on how profile is like biography, but that it requires a weaving of elements and progression that was not expected in earlier grades. Yagoda (2000) observes that the writer of a profile should approach the task as if he were “continually circling around the subject, taking snapshots all the way, until finally emerging with a three-dimensional hologram.” The area that students need to demonstrate growth is how to take those “snapshots.”[30] Rather than write a paragraph that follows the structure of topic sentence, evidence, explanation, evidence, explanation and concluding sentence, the area in which students will grow will be directly related to discussing how authors use interview, anecdote, observation and description to string together snapshots to profile an individual. Conducting interviews with the subject of a profile can be particularly useful in gathering material to use in a piece.

Another interesting metaphor for the process of writing a profile is comparing it to the work that an artist would engage in when creating a profile from a silhouette. Jessee (2009) writes that silhouette artists select the prominent features of a subject in profile by cutting around the curves and using contrasting paper to highlight the portrait outline; she notes, “writers take a similar approach, though they fill out their character sketches with quotations, events, and opinions, in addition to a physical description of their subject.[31] The introduction section of the Norton Reader makes several key observations of profiles as a writing genre: the writer must seek to “discover special characteristics or qualities” of the subject, including “vivid details, humorous stories…[and] recalling idiosyncratic stories and sayings.”[32] When reading profile, teachers need to unpack how the author is highlighting the prominent features of the person and for what purpose. As we have explored in seminar discussion with both personal experience essays and profiles, teachers must get students to think about the public point of the piece.

Examples of Craft in Profiles

We read several profiles to prepare for seminar that shared anecdotes, observations/descriptions that circled around the subject well enough to create strong images in the reader’s mind. One powerful example of a writer circling around his subject in a profile is the essay titled “Under the Influence” by Scott Russell Sanders. In this essay, Sanders is profiling his father who struggles with alcohol addiction. He creates a complex image of his father in the piece by describing how he would slip away into the barn to drink and deny that he had consumed any alcohol.[33] Consider the image that Sanders creates from a carefully developed description in the second paragraph of the piece:

> In the perennial present of memory, I [the author/son] slip into the garage or barn to see my father tipping back the flat green bottles of wine, the brown cylinders of whiskey, the cans of beer disguised in paper bags. His Adam’s apple bobs, the liquid gurgles, he wipes the sandy-haired back of a hand over his lips, and then, his bloodshot gaze bumping into me, he stashes the bottle or can inside his jacket, under the workbench, between two bales of hay, and we both pretend the moment has not occurred.[34]

In this passage, the reader is instantly put into a moment that the narrator of the text has experienced with his father that highlights his father's problems and how they impacted their relationship. A significant portion of the essay explores all the ways that the father's overconsumption of alcohol impacted their relationship.

A few paragraphs further in the text, Sanders steps out of narrating episodes of his father directly to share a critical observation of the language we use regarding alcohol.

> Consider a few of our synonyms for *drunk*: tipsy, tight, pickled, soused, and plowed; stoned and stewed, lubricated and inebriated, juiced and sluiced; three sheets to the wind, in your cups, out of your mind, under the table; lit up, tanked up, wiped out; besotted, blotto, bombed, and buzzed; plastered, polluted, putrefied; loaded or looped, boozy or woozy, fuddled, or smashed; crocked and shit-faced, corked and pissed, snockered and sloshed.[35]

The connotation of these words tends to make light of being drunk. They suggest that it is not that big of a deal, that individuals may be too carefree when it comes to consuming alcohol to the point of being drunk. Besides creating rhythm in this paragraph by including several words that use either internal rhyme or consonance to create rhythm, his use of punctuation forces the reader to read this section in a very deliberate manner. The connected yet halted manner that the reader is forced to read this passage induces the reader to engage in careful reflection. Sanders wants the reader to consider the usage of these words and crafts one elaborate sentence to force the reader to evaluate each word. The variety of language registers that he juxtaposes, ranging from "inebriated" to "shit-faced," create strong images in the reader's mind. The reader begins to picture individuals that would speak in each of those registers, suggesting the pervasive nature of alcoholism. To make sure the reader comes to a specific conclusion, Sander's makes his point crystal clear for the reader when he writes, "no dictionary of synonyms for drunk would soften the anguish of watching our prince [his dad] turn into a frog."[36] The pain the narrator feels in this line is palpable.

To create another image of his father for the reader, Sanders compares his father to the subject of the poem, "My Papa's Waltz." In that poem, the speaker is scooped up by his father who had been drinking; they engage in a drunken waltz.[37] In discussing the poem, individuals speculate about whether the scene is loving, violent, or a mixture of both. The uncertainty and tension in the poem amplifies the anecdote that Sanders shares immediately before the poem when he writes, "in his good night kiss we smelled the cloying sweetness of Clorets, the mints he chewed to camouflage his dragon's breath."[38] The images in the poem and anecdotes are powerful and speak to the weaving that is at the heart of the craft choices that the author makes in this piece.

This was not the only profile that was read in seminar that demonstrated craft decisions that painted nuanced images of a subject. We also read an excerpt from *An American Childhood* by Annie Dillard. Dillard reflects on multiple facets and anecdotes about her mother, making interesting craft choices such as capturing some of her mother's favorite quotes. Consider the opening of the excerpt, as Dillard drops the reader right into anecdote that captures her mother's idiosyncratic nature as her husband listens to a baseball game.

> Just as Mother passed through, the radio announcer cried-with undue drama- "Terwilliger bunts one!"
>
> "Terwilliger bunts one?" Mother cried back, stopped short. She turned. "Is that English?"

> “The player’s name is Terwilliger,” Father said. “He bunted.”
>
> “That’s marvelous,” Mother said. “‘Terwilliger bunts one.’ No wonder you listen to baseball. ‘Terwilliger bunts one.’”[39]

She then proceeds to use that statement at times that are random, testing microphones, pens, typewriters, whispering it in people’s ears, and speaking it in response to others speaking foreign languages. This dialogue and her subsequent actions reveal the mother’s quick wit and off beat nature. This dialogue also shows that the mother seems to relish catching people off guard by doing or saying the unexpected. The mother clearly appreciates unique language and craft; so much so that she elevates the jargon of baseball because she likes the way the language sounds. The craft of the dialogue is revealing.

In another instance, Dillard uses an observation to deftly reveal more about her mother.

> She dearly loved to fluster people by throwing out a game’s rules at whim- when she was getting bored, losing in a dull sort of way, and when everybody else was taking it too seriously. If you turned your back, she moved the checkers around on the board. When you got them all straightened out, she denied she touched them.…[40]

This observation again serves to reveal how the author’s mother enjoyed ignoring social convention and enjoyed acting mischievously. When teaching adolescent writers, it is important to point out passages like the one above. If a student was writing about her mother as Dillard is writing, she would most likely say that her mother “messed with people.” In this instance, Dillard’s writing can act as a model for how developing an observation of a person can show us more about a character rather than just telling us directly. It creates a strong image in the reader’s mind about the mother’s character.

Dillard’s profile of her mother could also be used to consider the idea of a public point. In the essay, Dillard’s reverence for her mother’s independence shines, “she [Dillard’s mother] respected the rare few who broke through to new ways…she questioned everything… hers was a restless mental vigor…torpid conformity was a sin.”[41] In using this language to describe her mother, the author shows that while her mother’s antics may have caused frustration in the moment, she admires her mother’s independence and even admits by the end of the essay that her mother’s actions were in part to teach her children how to take a stand. By loading up the end of the profile with favorable quirks, the reader’s final perception of the author’s mother is generally favorable. She seems like a woman who was ahead of her time.

By thinking about craft elements carefully, teachers can pull out passages like the ones above and heighten student awareness of the tools that authors use to create the snapshots that ultimately paint a picture of an individual in the reader’s mind. By focusing on specific sections and thinking about the choices that the author made, student writers can begin to make similar choices in their own writing.

Teaching Strategies

Writers Workshop

Writers Workshop is an instructional approach that is intended to create the conditions necessary for students to read as a writer and explore the craft choices that authors make so that students can make similar choices when writing independently. It is important to briefly note that teaching writing is not easy; there are many components that need to be taught to foster effective writing. Research also indicates that there is a high prevalence of writing disabilities in many students that we teach; researchers found writing disabilities to affect between 6.9% and 14.7% of students and to exist with and without reading problems.[42] The range of student abilities that often exist within a classroom should push teachers away from whole group instruction to consider ways to give more targeted and specific feedback to each writer to meet instructional needs. Writers Workshop is an instructional approach that seeks to give targeted feedback that is appropriate to each learner. There is also some language that might be helpful when working with students in a Writers Workshop. Kissel and Miller (2015) suggest that teachers think about their questioning carefully before they confer with student writers, advocating for student choice in writing topics, locations and partners to write with in class.[43] These are all important conditions to think about as one organizes the structure of the workshop in a classroom.

The general way that I set up my Writers Workshop is that I highlight one writing habit or practice I want students to learn, they practice the habit or element of craft, they share what they learn, and then I look for that habit to appear in their writing products as I confer or assess student writing. My thought is to teach the writer, not just teach new modes of writing. There is a link in the resource section to an article that explores the types of questions that can be used to confer with students. The author argues that there are four questions that work in almost all scenarios: 1. How is it going? 2. Can you say more about that? 3. Would you consider trying _____ technique? 4. Are you ready to try this?[44] Given the nature of open-ended questions, students must explain their thinking about craft. This is putting the student in a position to make authentic writing decisions.

Character Sketch

Both profiles and personal experience essays make use of the character sketch. Many students do not think about characters in ways beyond describing their appearance. Students need to be taught different ways the elements of a character could be described to create images in the reader's mind while reading. In the resource section below, there is a link to a graphic organizer that is extremely helpful for teachers to get students thinking about the aspects of the characters that they are writing about. The graphic organizer has students think about several areas such as: physical description, background information, character trait information, significant events that shaped a character, potential stereotypes about the character, relationships that character has, the essence of the character, and the motivations and ambitions of the character.[45] As we read profiles in class, students will use this template to think about how the character is crafted in the text. My goal is to get students to see that authors rely on a lot of different means of description to paint a full picture of a character.

Close Reading and Assessment

To help students decide whether they want to write either a profile or a personal experience essay, students

need to read a couple of profiles and personal experience essays to think about the choices that authors make. There are a few sections that I have flagged in the research above that I will stop and discuss with my students from the content research above. In the Yale course, English S120E: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay, there are several different types of writing that students explore in readings and conversation: Personal Experience, Profile, Cultural Criticism, Review, Op-ed, Expert Knowledge, Description of a Place, Writing for the Ear, and others. From these readings, students are expected to write four different types of essays to workshop with peers: a personal experience essay, a profile, a cultural criticism/political argument, and a review to have workshopped by peers. This structure is valuable and can be modified in a few ways to suit different instructional contexts. For the purposes of this unit, the genre conventions of personal experience essays and profiles will be discussed and explored with students. To encourage autonomy and motivation, I am going to allow students the opportunity to choose the genre that they want to write in to demonstrate mastery.

Resources

Teacher Resources for Literary Nonfiction

- https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/john-mcphee John McPhee was recommended in seminar as an author that writes employing a variety of literary nonfiction styles. His methods for organizing essays include drawing them. He likes to think of his essays as having a shape and being able to clearly identify that shape before writing. He also expects his students at Princeton to be able to identify the shape that their pieces take as a form of reflection before conferring with them. He released a book called *Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process* in 2017 that offers many helpful suggestions for writers from his experience as a teacher and writer.
- https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/16/arts/writers-writing-easy-adverbs-exclamation-points-especially-hooptedoodle.html Elmore Leonard was considered by Stephen King to be the great American author. This list contains ten pieces of advice to would-be writers, including his famous advice that, “if it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.”
- http://fictionfoundry.alumni.columbia.edu/character_sketch_template This leads to a template that could easily be modified by a teacher to support students in developing a character sketch of an important person to describe in a piece of literary nonfiction. It has many characteristics that go beyond a character’s appearance.
- https://jerryjenkins.com/how-to-write-an-anecdote/ This leads to helpful writing advice on how to craft an anecdote. It also includes a couple of examples.
- http://www2.sandhills.edu/academic-departments/english/essaybasics/keyhole.html This website is helpful for understanding the structure of a basic five paragraph essay with a link to samples. The process is compared to the shape of an old-fashioned keyhole.
- https://movingwriters.org/2016/11/07/the-only-four-questions-youll-ever-need-to-ask-your-writers/ This article provides helpful advice to think about what to ask students as you confer with them about their writing. The author argues convincingly that there are four key questions that work in almost all conferences that a teacher will have with students.

Personal Experience

- https://owlcation.com/academia/How-to-Write-a-Personal-Essay This resource is helpful in outlining different organizational approaches for students as well as ways to narrow to a good topic)
- https://www.thoughtco.com/personal-essay-or-statement-1691498 This resource gives an overview of genre characteristics, links to several personal experience essays, and a sense of what a personal experience essay can reveal about the writer.

Profile

- https://www.thebalancecareers.com/writing-a-compelling-profile-of-a-person-2316038 This resource gives several pieces of advice to consider when drafting a profile of a person.
- https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a638/frank-sinatra-has-a-cold-gay-talese/ This is a link to a famous profile titled “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold.” This profile demonstrates many elements of craft and can be helpful to read as a professional model. This is not appropriate for student readers.

Appendix: Implementing District Standards

The language of the CCSS pays careful attention to author’s craft with an eye towards building craft in student writing. *The Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* Seminar emphasized several connections between reading and writing. In seminar, Fellows explored the craft that many writers employ across a variety of nonfiction genres. When thinking about the compositional choices that authors made in texts we read, we identified and discussed them in seminar with an eye toward thinking about our own writing. Consider the language of one of the English Language Arts CCSS for sixth grade: CCSS.RI.6.3 Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text [e.g., through examples or anecdotes].[46] The work of seminar in this case closely mirrored the work that I am entrusted to engage in with my students. In seminar, this had Fellows reading creative nonfiction, discussing passages with peers, and thinking of the craft choices that the author has made.

Another CCSS that is relevant to this unit is RI.6.5: Analyze how a particular sentence, paragraph, chapter, or section fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the ideas.[47] This standard aligns perfectly with the type of reading of both profiles and personal experience essays that needs to occur to heighten student awareness of author’s craft, so that they in turn can make similar craft decisions in their own writing. This standard encourages the practice of pulling out key sections from the text to discuss author’s craft.

The final CCSS that I think is extremely important to my instructional approach in this unit is CCSS W.6.9b: Apply *grade 6 Reading standards* to writing literary nonfiction [e.g., "Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not"].[48] This writing standard is written as a substandard, but it is important because it dictates a couple of key instructional elements that should be happening. The first observation looking at the standard is that there is a connection between the Reading and Writing standards; the standards are calling for the application of the Reading standards in writing. This means that students should be reading with an eye towards writer’s

craft. The second implication of the standard is that literary nonfiction should not only be read, but it should also be produced by students. Literary nonfiction is not the typical five paragraph essay that many English Language Arts teachers still teach to write nonfiction text. In my classroom, the language of the standards dictates my instructional approach.

Reference List

Brantley, Jessica. *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* seminar, Yale National Initiative, New Haven, July 8-16 2019.

Coker, David L., Kristen D. Ritchey, Ximena Uribe-Zarain, and Austin S. Jennings. “An Analysis of First-Grade Writing Profiles and Their Relationship to Compositional Quality.” *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 51, no. 4 (July 2018): 336–50. doi:10.1177/0022219417708171.

"Character Sketch Template." Columbia Fiction Foundry. (accessed July 16, 2019). http://fictionfoundry.alumni.columbia.edu/character_sketch_template.

Dillard, Annie. "from An American Childhood." In *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction*, 98-103. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.

Douglass, Frederick. “Learning to Read.” In *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction*, 404-408. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.

Eighner, Lars. "On Dumpster Diving." In *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction*, 55-64. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.

"English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Informational Text » Grade 6." English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Informational Text » Grade 6 | Common Core State Standards Initiative. (accessed July 16, 2019). http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/6/.

"English Language Arts Standards » Writing » Grade 6." English Language Arts Standards » Writing » Grade 6 | Common Core State Standards Initiative. (accessed July 16, 2019). http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/6/.

Ferriss, Tim. "Writing with the Master – The Magic of John McPhee." The Blog of Author Tim

Ferriss. December 11, 2014. (accessed July 13, 2019). https://tim.blog/2014/12/11/john-mcphee/#comments.

Goldthwaite, Melissa A., Joseph Bizup, John C. Brereton, Anne E. Fernald, and Linda H.

Peterson. *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction*. New York: W.W. Norton &

Company, 2016, Introduction, page liv

Jenkins, Jerry B. "How to Write an Anecdote That Makes Your Nonfiction Come Alive." Jerry

Jenkins | Proven Writing Tips. April 18, 2019. (accessed July 13, 2019).

https://jerryjenkins.com/how-to-write-an-anecdote/.

Jessee, Amy. "Strategic Stories: An Analysis of the Profile Genre" (2009). All Theses. 550.

(accessed July 13, 2019).https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/550

King, Stephen. "Stephen King on Why He Loves Ahnuld and Hates Celine." EW.com. February

1, 2007. (accessed July 13, 2019).

https://ew.com/article/2007/02/01/stephen-king-why-he-loves-ahnuld-and-hates-celine/.

Kissel, Brian T., and Erin T. Miller. 2015. “Reclaiming Power in the Writers’ Workshop.”

Reading Teacher 69 (1): 77–86. doi:10.1002/trtr.1379.

Leonard, Elmore. "Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hooptedoodle." The

New York Times. July 16, 2001. (accessed July 13, 2019).
https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/16/arts/writers-writing-easy-adverbs-exclamation-points-especially-hooptedoodle.html.

Marchetti, Allison. "The Only Four Questions You'll Ever Need to Ask Your Writers." Moving

Writers. November 07, 2016. (accessed July 16, 2019).
https://movingwriters.org/2016/11/07/the-only-four-questions-youll-ever-need-to-ask- your-writers/.

Nordquist, Richard. "A Profile in Composition." ThoughtCo. (accessed June 20, 2019).

https://www.thoughtco.com/profile-composition-1691681 .

Nordquist, Richard. "Character Sketch in Composition." ThoughtCo. (accessed July 13, 2019).

https://www.thoughtco.com/character-sketch-composition-1689746.

Sanders, Scott Russel. “Under the Influence,” In *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of*

Nonfiction, 87-97. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.

"The Keyhole Essay." (accessed July 16, 2019).

http://www2.sandhills.edu/academic-departments/english/essaybasics/keyhole.html.

“Twain,” Chicago Public Schools, (accessed June 18, 2019).

http://schoolinfo.cps.edu/schoolprofile/schooldetails.aspx?SchoolID=610206

Warner, John. *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities.*

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. https://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed July 15, 2019).

White, Ralph. "Character Sketch Template." Columbia Fiction Foundry. August 24, 2014.

(accessed July 13, 2019). http://fictionfoundry.alumni.columbia.edu/character_sketch_template.

Yagoda, Ben. *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*. New York: Scribner, 2000.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Notes

1. “Twain,” Chicago Public Schools School Report Card
2. "The Keyhole Essay."
3. Brantley, Jessica. *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* seminar
4. Warner, John. *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities*, 28-31.
5. Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well,* 99
6. Brantley, Jessica. *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* seminar
7. Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well,* 99
8. Ibid
9. Brantley, Jessica. *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* seminar
10. Ibid, 96-98
11. Nordquist, Richard. "A Profile in Composition.”
12. Ferriss, Tim. "Writing with the Master – The Magic of John McPhee."
13. Ibid
14. Brantley, Jessica. *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* seminar
15. Ibid
16. Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well,* 99
17. Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well,* 232-233
18. Ibid
19. Ibid
20. Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well,* 134-146
21. Frederick Douglass, “Learning to Read,” 404-408.
22. Ibid
23. Ibid
24. Lars Eighner, "On Dumpster Diving," 55-64.
25. Ibid

26. Ibid
27. Ibid
28. Ibid
29. Nordquist, Richard. "A Profile in Composition."
30. Yagoda, Ben. *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*.
31. Jessee, Amy. "Strategic Stories: An Analysis of the Profile Genre"
32. Goldthwaite, Melissa A., Joseph Bizup, John C. Brereton, Anne E. Fernald, and Linda H. Peterson, Introduction, page liv.
33. Scott Russel Sanders, “Under the Influence,” 87-97.
34. Ibid
35. Ibid
36. Ibid
37. Ibid
38. Ibid
39. Annie Dillard, "from An American Childhood," 98-103.
40. Ibid
41. Ibid
42. Coker, David L., Kristen D. Ritchey, Ximena Uribe-Zarain, and Austin S. Jennings. “An Analysis of First-Grade Writing Profiles and Their Relationship to Compositional Quality.”
43. Kissel, Brian T., and Erin T. Miller. “Reclaiming Power in the Writers’ Workshop.”
44. Marchetti, Allison. "The Only Four Questions You'll Ever Need to Ask Your Writers."
45. Nordquist, Richard. "Character Sketch in Composition."
46. "English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Informational Text » Grade 6."
47. Ibid
48. "English Language Arts Standards » Writing » Grade 6."