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How High-School Students Can Echo Professional Writers in Their Own Personal Essays

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Reading should not be about skimming to the end of a text. Yet, in today's digital world, our reading experiences become shorter and more superficial. Almost always, the conversation about or the reaction to a text focuses on *what* was said. Rarely do we converse about *how* it was said. Because of this focus on information and minimizing of structure, reading mistakenly equals zooming over the screen or page for keywords. With the prominence of high-stakes multiple-choice tests, students, too, train themselves--or educators erroneously train them--to search for information that can be pulled out to answer a question.

While skimming might help students to succeed on poorly designed teacher assessments or a few items on the ACT, SAT, or AP English exams, our high-school students don't learn much from this.

I teach in a large urban district where the population is over 90% low income. Most of the students are first-generation and will be the first in their family to attend college. Therefore, in this context, which exists in so many of our public schools, a high-school English teacher should provide students with literacy experiences that build their ability to make it to and through challenging post-secondary academic settings.

In "Critical Thinking," Robert Ennis explains how we should distinguish between basic clarification, building a basis for decisions, inferring, and challenging illogical thinking. We understand, then, that, in Ennis's view, critical thinking is the well-reasoned problem-solving process where we examine information and decide what to believe, communicate, or do.

Our work as writing teachers in high school should focus on guiding students to engage with and think critically about the information they access.

As an AP English Language and journalism teacher, I must focus on getting students to make sense of and assess the validity of texts. Over the past twenty-three years, I increased the complexity of texts as my confidence and competence with teaching these increased. However, the trap for teachers (I'm probably guilty of it) is to spend most of our time helping students comprehend these texts. In Ennis's view, this would be lower-level thinking.

In recent years, I've included experiences to help students assess the validity of texts by looking for fallacies. More recently, my focus moved into helping students analyze the structure of a well-written text, so they can make more effective writing decisions in their own essays. As a result, this unit highlights how teachers can

engage high-school students with socially conscious, well-written essays and examine how the writer structures and develops ideas. Students can then take responsible, informed risks with their own writing at the paragraph and sentence level, thereby elevating their own style.

In Beyond Literary Analysis, Allison Marchetti and Rebekah O'Dell explain four tools students can use to explore the quality of texts in any area:

Passion: "The writer's compass. Passion is the writer's wholehearted investment in the text she is exploring. Deeper than just admiration, the writer takes her subject seriously, full of conviction that it matters."

Ideas: "The places the writer explores. Ideas encompass everything the writer considers and discusses--claims, reasons, evidence."

Structure: "The maps a writer uses to chart her course. Structure includes the writer's focus, paragraphing, how she leads and concludes, and visual structure tools."

Authority: "The writer's know-how that enables her to explore a text. Authority speaks to a writer's content knowledge, tone, word choice, and use of grammar and conventions."

While all of these are important elements, this project will focus on the structure of personal essays by focusing on this question: How do we teach high-school students to examine the structure of a personal essay at the paragraph and sentence level, practice it, and mirror it in their own original writing?

Clarification of Terms

First, some clarification of terms. Sometimes, we hear the word "memoir" used to describe a personal piece of writing. As Fred Robinson tells us in "History of English and Its Practical Uses," "French provides our terms of social formality, polite manners, the arts, and government . . . There is a cool detachment about most French-derived words, a feeling of social diplomacy." Humorously, however, Robinson, adds: "Or, as someone else had said, "French is the true and native language of insincerity."

In this seminar, I shared in a discussion how the term "autobiography" connotes a piece of writing that's historical, technical, cold (as opposed to the "cool" mentioned above.) The use of "autobiography" might also connote the need to write an all-encompassing history of themselves in chronological order, which would likely result in a long, unengaging piece of writing with no true sense of audience.

Others might use the term "personal experience" to describe the type of essays we'll discuss here. But that too might mislead writers to communicate an event, a situation that challenged the writer but does not have a "public point," an insight for the reader. This issue of "public point" became a term mentioned frequently in our conversations at this Yale seminar after our professor explained this valuable approach to helping students understand an audience-centered task.

In *On Writing Well,* William Zinsser discusses the "transaction" that must take place between reader and and writer, which relates to the concept of a public point. "Ultimately the product that any writer has to sell is not the subject being written about, but who he or she is" (5). After all, Zinsser explains, we, as readers, must

understand “what holds [us] is the enthusiasm of the writer for his field. How was he drawn into it? What emotional baggage did he bring along? How did it change his life?” (5). Out of this transaction, the author explains that the writing will produce “humanity and warmth” (5).

This brings us to the term of “personal narrative.” The concern with this phrase rests with the idea that it might communicate a rudimentary story or a piece of fiction almost. It’s important to recognize what Zinsser tells us about in his chapter titled “Nonfiction as Literature:” this genre “enables [people] to write about what they know or can observe or can find out. This is especially true of young people and students. They will write far more willingly about subjects that touch their own lives or that they have an aptitude for. Motivation,” he reminds us, after all, “is at the heart of writing” (99).

So for the purposes of this unit, I’ll use the term “personal essay” to define the type of nonfiction writing students will read, examine, mirror, practice, revise, and publish in a responsibly fulfilling way. In French, as we likely know, “essayer” means “to try, to attempt.” The focus of this unit aims to create opportunities for students to try to mirror the writing of accomplished writers as they communicate a personal transformation struggle (theirs or someone else’s) that highlights a public point to a specified audience in a style and length that fit that rhetorical context. Finally, “personal essay” remains a term used on college applications and a term used commonly in the high-school classroom.

Guiding Principles and Assumptions

In order to arrive at some practical answers teachers can apply in their classrooms, we need to ensure we have a set of guiding principles.

While the creation, implementation, and assessment of the Common Core standards might be controversial, what these standards ask teachers to do is not.

In “Five Things Every Teacher Should Be Doing to Meet the Common Core State Standards,” the first action step Lauren Davis outlines is “Lead High-Level, Text-Based Discussions.” Before we ask students for their opinions and personal reactions, Davis stresses the research that discourages using that as an entry point to conversations about texts.

Another action step Davis outlines is “Increase Text Complexity.” Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards advises that “material should be difficult enough that students are learning something new, but not so hard that they give up.”

This, of course, requires some responsible risk taking with text selection on the teacher’s part and an awareness of students (not impossible for any socially conscious, dedicated teacher).

As a result, this unit aims to reach teachers who demonstrate competence with engaging students at the comprehension level of reading complex texts (when in doubt, reflecting on past evaluations and instructional approaches or student artifacts can help a teacher self-assess). This unit also assumes an open-minded, socically and politically progressive outlook on the teacher’s part, which will be encouraged by the selection of texts that can serve as guides to students to mirror in style and structure.

Most importantly, however, this unit fights against the outdated ideas of writing formulas such as the rudimentary, unengaging five-paragraph essay with three reasons, the self-centered diary entry disguised and accepted as a public document, the personal essay that presents predictable resolutions to trite topics. Students should not feel pressured to feel that all personal essays must be something unique and ground breaking. As our professor explained, personal essays must consist of something "surprising and important." In my classroom, I've also posted this idea by French artist Eugene Delacroix: "What moves those of genius, what inspires their work is not new ideas, but their obsession with the idea that what has already been said is still not enough." Students must, therefore, assume an audience-centered approach (I use our high-school community, teens and adults, as the default audience for most of our writing assignments) as they determine how to enter a conversation with this personal essay.

I learned the idea of entering a conversation from *They Say, I Say: Moves that Matter in Academic Writing.* There, the authors explain to students that "the underlying structure of effective academic writing--and of responsible public discourse--resides not just in stating our own ideas but in listening closely to others around us, summarizing their views in a way that they will recognize, and responding with our own ideas in kind" (3). While personal essays remain distict from the academic writing first-year college students produce (in purpose, style, format), the idea we should take away from this philosophy is that personal essays gain more meaning when the writer connects his or her or their experiences to something bigger--the "public point." Therefore, in the pre-writing stages, accomplished writing teachers emphasize the importance of and need for information gathering that includes an awareness of the personal, social, and cultural context in which the essay is written and published. Another assumption is that teachers using this unit demostrate competence with guiding students through the writing process--which includes reading. For teachers who need assistance guiding students to engage with texts individually, in small groups, and in whole-class settings, *Deeper Reading* and *Beyond Literary Analysis* prove to be valuable resources.

Examining Personal Essay Structure: The Lead and the Ending

As high-school teachers know, teens sometimes think they know more than they do. Last fall, I selected a chapter from Ta-nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me,* which appeared in a 2015 issue of th *Atlantic* as "Letter to My Son," as a mentor text.

My approach failed.

I approached the text through my eyes as a man of color raising a boy of color in an urban setting, as a first-generation college grad, as a Chicano, as a writer. I quickly realized that, despite the pre-reading and during-reading guidance I provided, the takeaway for my 11th grade Chicago students came down to this: "Yeah, there's racism in the world. We know."

How? How could this be all they saw?

Despite over two decades of teaching experience, I still struggle sometimes. I actually welcomed the opportunity to re-think how to help students engage with this complex text about an issue that grows more and more complex each day under a presidency that tells congresswomen of color to "go back where they came from."

I realized my mistake when I reflected on *Deeper Reading* by Kelly Gallagher where the author discusses the questions posed by Sheridan Blau to guide students through a second reading of the text, "second-draft reading."

1. What does it say?
2. What does it mean?
3. What does it matter?

My approach to this text mainly focused on the first question and somewhat on the second. Engagement and discussion faded quickly because I didn't structure a reading and writing experience that would answer the third question.

The first question is one most teachers focus on: the "literal-level comprehension."

Now, I'd like to modify the second question. It's vague and can mislead students toward that fallacy of "it can mean anything you want it to" in English class. No, it can't. I propose this instead: "What does it reveal?" With this question, students can begin looking for motivation, subtleties in relationships, subtextual arguments, intentions.

Still, the most important question is the last one. As Gallagher explains, "Asking 'What does it matter?' becomes the reason we read great [texts] in the first place."

One way to get students to questions two and three rests with the insights Zinsser gives us in his chapter about "The Lead and the Ending." Here, he explains that "The most important sentence in any article is the first one . . . Some leads hook the reader with just a few well-baited sentences; others amble on for several pages, exerting a slow but steady pull. Every article," we must remember, "poses a different problem, and the only valid test is: does it work?" (54).

Here's what students could have discovered and discussed and evaluated in the lead of Coates's essay.

The first detail to consider is the James Baldwin quote that Coates selected as the epigraph: "And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white." Readers need to pause for a moment and recognize that there is no subject in the quote. "Who has brought?" readers should ask. When the reader finally gets a subject, it's vague: "They." The simplest and most important question this should generate in readers is "Why? Why do 'they' think they're white?"

A quick Google search gives readers an understanding of the complexity of Baldwin's works. An astute reader might ask, "If someone thinks he or she is white, does Coates fear his son will think he's white?" Or more blutly: "Why does Coates fear his son will think he's white?"

The image of a younger Coates and his son, who appears a few months old, should also be part of this conversation. The image Photoshopped by the *Atlantic* sets up the context readers to explore the question of why this matters. The pose, the posture, the facial expressions should all be examined. The background and color added to this image should be as well. A good question I picked up somewhere, some time ago is "How would it be different if . . . ?" For example, how would it be different if the father and son were smiling?

After reading the essay once and engaging in experiences to ensure students understand what this essay says, students should then move into a close reading of the first and last paragraphs of this essay (analyzing the entire piece would take too long and decrease student engagement).

“Son,

Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body. The host was broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and I was seated in a remote studio on the Far West Side of Manhattan. A satellite closed the miles between us, but no machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak. When the host asked me about my body, her face faded from the screen, and was replaced by a scroll of words, written by me earlier that week.”

Following Zinsser’s guidance, we notice that the first sentence is a direct address to a primary audience being accessed by a secondary audience. Students should explore what it means that it opens--not with the son’s name--but with a title. The salutation appears in the essay separated from the text, mirroring the relationship the author likely feels with his son in this context. Coates sets up the context by begining the full sentence with “Last Sunday.” Sunday traditionally becomes a day of rest and reflection. But not for this writer. His ideas, his being gets questioned. Futhermore, the writer remains unconvinced his expression of ideas in that response made any difference. The doubt lingers, tugs at his insecurities. The writer has a public audience at his grasp. However, he does not know how to respond. This moves us closer to answers for the third question. Coates reveals that a reflective context--setting us up for a public point that exceeds the oversimplified interpretation my students hastily reached. This reveals the sense of loss and emptiness this father feels and fears in today’s volatile political context. “To lose,” “the gap,” “replaced” all contribute to the father’s fear that his son will fade into an identity of whiteness. The use of “summoned” communicates a power dynamic between the writer and the host, a dynamic symbolic of the divisions in today’s context. And then, climactically, the writer must confront his own words, as if they were thrown to him, at him, on him not in an interview but in an interrogation. The conflict emerges.

In the last paragraph, students should consider Zinsser’s insight that conclusions in an essay--any essay, really—“should encapsulate the idea of the piece and conclude with a sentence that jolts [readers] with its fitness or unexpectedness” (65). Zinsser elaborates by sharing how he tries “to bring the story full circle--to strike at the end an echo of a note that was sounded at the beginning” (65). An echo.

Students can juxtapose the first paragraph with the last in Coates’s essay:

“I am speaking to you as I always have—treating you as the sober and serious man I have always wanted you to be, who does not apologize for his human feelings, who does not make excuses for his height, his long arms, his beautiful smile. You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable. None of that can change the math anyway. I never wanted you to be twice as good as them, so much as I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief bright life determined to struggle. The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.”

The echoes in the ending exist in the contrasts. There is a familiarity in the unapologetic tone the speaker uses in the closing. It’s clear these conversations, these interactions happen between this father and son. The distance disappeared. The dash adds emphasis to the parallelism of the ideas that follow, a way to make the father’s confidence echo off the page. Coates found the words he needed when the essay began. “You” makes the conversation intimate, sentimental. The affirmation of identity rings true.

In the beginning, the speaker wanted to bring his son close for the conversation. At the end, he prepares to let him go into a world described in opposites. The “attack” the father wishes his son to espouse is

punctuated by the alliteration of the words that follow. Most importantly, Coates draws a distinction between his son and those “who must believe they are white” in such a confident tone that an insecurity the speaker demonstrated in the beginning has faded. The emotional tremor shifted--as it should in all personal essays when we examine the lead and the end.

Uncovering these “echoes” should prepare most students to judge the structure in their own writing and make the necessary revisions.

To help students mirror the effective use of echoes in their own writing, they can juxtapose the opening paragraph--which should set up the conflict--with the ending--which should offer echoes of resolution and emotional shift. Cutting these out and glueing them side by side on a sheet of paper lends itself to a visual, structured comparison.

One strategy I suggest to students, after they identify the conflict they want to write about, is to reflect on the moment when the situation somehow changed significantly. If they write that transformation scene first and fill it with the emotional and intellectual weight of the experience, they can then make decisions about how to open and close the essay. I say more about the structure of the actual essay later in this unit.

The Rhetoric of the Writing

One way to help students get to Gallagher’s second and third questions is by helping them understand the rhetoric in the writing at the essay, paragraph, and sentence level.

In *Rhetorical Grammar*, Martha Kolln explains how students must understand “the grammatical choices available to them when they write and the rhetorical effects those choices will have on the reader.”

Perhaps the most useful section Kolln’s book is “Part II: Connecting with the Reader.” Here, the author addresses two elements that can help students address Gallagher’s second and third questions: Cohesion and The Writer’s Voice.

Kolln explains cohesion in terms of repetition or “lexical cohesion” (67). We might see a word, idea, image repeated in the essay. We might also see, Kolln explains, “synonyms and other related words, not just actual repetition: birds/robins, rodents/mice, evening meal/supper, friend/companion, vacation/trip/holiday” (68). Or this cohesion might arrive in the form of parallelism, “the repetition of whole structures, such as phrases and clauses.”

Ta-nehisi Coates brings forth the use of parallelism in the beginning of the essay’s high point where he decides what he wants his son to do:

“But still you must struggle. The Struggle is in your name, Samori—you were named for Samori Touré, who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body. He died in captivity, but the profits of that struggle and others like it are ours, even when the object of our struggle, as is so often true, escapes our grasp.”

Coates continues in this section to reveal the wisdom and intellectual legacy his son must inherit:

“I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone.”

Kolln reminds us to distinguish between repetition and redundancy. “Parallelism of the kind we see [in Coates’s essay]--parallelism as a stylistic device--invariably calls attention to itself” (83). The parallelism, in Kolln’s terms, “added a dramatic dimension to the prose” (83). Redundancy, on the other hand, is “the unwanted repetition of known information” (153). This approach should, again, emphasize the importance of an audience-centered writing experience for students. Parrallelism, I’ve explained to students over the years, should contribute to increased emphasis or development of an idea or situation that merits this extra attention.

As students draft their transformation section first--before they write the lead or end--they can ask themselves, “When did everything change?” Because this section of the personal essay should be the most intellectually or emotionally intense in all of the text, the use of parallelism contributes to the stylistically effective impact. Common types of parallelism fall into three categories:

Anaphora: the repetition of a word or phrase as used in Coates repetition of “who” in the example above

Antimetabole: repetition in inverted order as in the classic argument by many Mexicans living in the U.S. Southwest--”We didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us.”

Antithesis: the repetition of concepts using opposites as in Neil Armstrong’s “small step for man, but a giant leap for mankind”

Zinsser’s ideas about “unity” compliments Kolln’s ideas about cohesion. The author suggests writers ask themselves some questions such as, “In what capacity am I going to address the reader? (Reporter? Provider of information? Average man or woman?) What pronoun and tense am I going to use? What style? (Impersonal reportorial? Personal but formal? Personal and casual?) What attitude am I going to take toward the material? (Involved? Detached? Judgmental? Ironic? Amused?) How much do I want to cover? What one point do I want to make?” (51-52).

Accomplished teachers know the answers to these questions come from structured experiences of the pre-writing and writing processes. If these questions overwhelm the writer, Zinsser offers another piece of guidance: “Decide what corner of your subject you are going to bite off, and be content to cover it well and stop” (52).

A rhetorically effective length for personal essays written by high-school students has proven to be two-three typed double-spaced pages. Less than that, the essay runs the risk of coming off as underdeveloped. More than that and the writer risks losing the reader. If the piece will appear online, an effective length is 600-1,000 words, experience has taught me. Of course, the artful essays we read in class don’t have to be limited by these constraints. The mentor texts we select for students can—and perhaps, should be—longer to help them develop stamina as readers.

A highly effective, and longer, personal essay that demonstrates the cohesion (or unity) is “Under the

Influence" by Scott Russell Sanders. This mentor text takes on the experience of being an alcoholic's child. The author, now grown and accomplished, reflects on the damage on his family as a result of the alcoholism. While this could have been a predictable essay where the grown son tells about all the ugly moments, describes the father's death, and then ends by reflecting on his relationship with alcohol, the unity will help students see how the essay escapes this trap of triteness. Interestingly, the predictable plot line I mention above *is* what essentially happens in the essay. However, Sanders's use of rhetorically impressive cohesion and incorporation of other texts produces a richly crafted essay that reinforces Delacroix's idea that "what has already been said is still not enough."

First, the *Norton Reader* categorizes this essay as a profile, making it a resource that can push students to write about someone else's experience through their lens. Ultimately, this profile reveals as much about the writer as it does about the alcoholic father. Any well-written personal essay should reveal as much about the writer as it does about the subject.

The essay builds off the the opening sentence: "My father drank" (36). To present the intensity of this situation, Sanders develops the cohesion by comparing his father to "a gut-punched boxer," and "a starving dog." The use of verbs here teaches students to challenge themselves in the revision process. Phrases such as "gasps for breath" and "gobbles food" extend the boxer and dog images, respectively, to communicate the severity. In what I call the background section (the part of the essay that contextualizes the conflict or explains how it started) Sanders creates cohesion by presenting "synonyms for drunk: tipsy, tight, pickled, soused, and plowed" (37). He develops the background with references to the Greek and Roman gods of wine and intoxication. He references the cultural acceptibility with drunkeness. His use of Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" hints at the duality of living with an alcoholic: could be comfortable at times and could be frightening at times. The personal experiences become merged with Bibilical references and on and on the trauma gets exposed and connected to other sources that highlight the need for transformation.

The high point of the essay comes when the writer's father, after fifteen years of sobriety, drinks again. Sanders recalls how he watched "the amber liquid pour down his throat, the alcohol steal into his blood, the key turn in his brain" (44). The connections Sanders makes to a process, a series of automatic cause and effects, contributes to the unity, the surprise, and the importance of this public point. The cohesion between this scene and the end is poignant as the writer grapples with his own addiction to work--which is exposed to him by his child.

In seminar, I shared how this essay could also lead students to a good conversation about audience. The intended audience is probably not alcoholics. It could be someone who drinks too much regularly or on occasion. But, I'll argue, the public point to readers of "Under the Influcence" is to the children of alcoholics who must decide what they want the legacy of an alcoholic parent to be.

To help students analyze and evaluate the cohesion of an essay, they can use Zinsser's questions to create a table such as this and continue filling in the chart with textual evidence.

Here is how they might fill in the chart using Coates's essay:

A. What public point does the writer aim to make?
Young African American men should never never forget how the legacy of racism destroys lives today, reminding us of young men of color's obliteration when they consider themselves "white" or free of struggle.

B. Logos (presenting ideas, evoking contemplation): In what capacity does the writer address the reader? (Reporter? Provider of information? Average man or woman?) What pronoun and tense does the writer use?	C. Ethos (gaining the reader's trust) What style does the writer use? (Impersonal reportorial? Personal but formal? Personal and casual?) [The metacognition]	D. Pathos (evoking emotions in the reader): What attitude does the writer take toward the material? (Involved? Detached? Judgmental? Ironic? Amused?)
The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant "government of the people" but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term *people* to actually mean.	a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body	Americans deify democracy in a way that allows for a dim awareness that they have
the elevation of the belief in being white was not achieved through wine tastings and ice-cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land	I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body	The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy.
Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store	I felt an old and indistinct sadness well up in me	all our phrasing—*race relations*, *racial chasm*, *racial justice*, *racial profiling*, *white privilege*, even *white supremacy*—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience

To help students through the classication, I added information about logos, ethos, and pathos. The public point can be expressed in many different way but should be presented as a debateable argument. It's the writer's argument, after all. Years ago, I developed the following structure to guide students through the development of an argument that avoids the rudimentary one usually taught, which includes three reasons. I say more about this in my essay "If You Write or Teach 5-Paragraph Essays, Stop It!" on my blog, *The White Rhino*, at ChicagoNow.com.

Writing Thesis Statements in 3 Steps

1. Make the topic specific	2. Continue with a debatable phrase	3. Explain the significance to the audience
Exactly who? When? How many? Which ones? Where?	does. . . does not . . . should . . . should not... highlights... ignores . . .	, proving that... , resulting in... , making us doubt... , reminding us that...

Example 1: The longer school day in Chicago next year does not guarantee that students will be productive in classes, reminding us that young people need to find learning meaningful.

Example 2: The longer school day in Chicago next year does guarantee more learning opportunities, resulting in increased student success.

As students fill in parts of the chart with Zinsser's questions (and these can be divided up among the class for a more efficient experience), they can begin to make sense of why this essay matters. We must recognize, of course, that there might be information that can go in more than one column. Students can make thoughtful classifications by looking at the pattern of information beginning to reveal itself in each column. They might ask themselves, "Does this information fit with the cohesion that's being revealed or should it go somewhere else?"

This exercise serves mainly as a deconstruction exercise where students examine how the essay was put together. If students need a more hands-on approach to this, they can use index cards and a long piece of yarn. The writer's argument goes at the top. One of the questions goes on another card underneath that. Individual pieces of evidence go on separate cards that are taped on the yarn in the order they appear in the essay. While an analysis of the entire essay would be possible, this would be overkill. Instead, students can closely examine a specific section of the essay. If we examine the structure of most effectively written essays, we'll see five parts--not five paragraphs:

The lead with the conflict

Background on how this conflict began

The experience that extends the conflict

The turning point with the intellectually or emotionally charged experience where the situation changed

The insightful closing that echoes the lead without redundancy

To ensure students engage with the third question of “What does it matter?” as presented in *Deeper Reading*, students can draft a paragraph that evaluates to what level the writer revealed the intended public point, or argument, through the cohesion of one or more of the columns.

To guide students, with this writing exercise, we can turn to four paragraph structures presented in *The Writer’s Options: Combining to Composing:*

The Direct Paragraph: “opens with a direct statement of its topic sentence. The sentences after the opening develop the paragraph’s controlling idea by defining it, qualifying it, analyzing it, and--most frequently--illustrating it” (197).

The Climatic Paragraph: “a direct paragraph turned upside down: (198-199).

The Turnabout Paragraph: “move in one direction and then ‘turn about’ in another. The turnabout paragraph begins with an idea that is often the opposite of its controlling idea” (200).

The Interrogative Paragraph: “opens with a [thought-provoking] question” (202).

To help students judge their own and their peers’ cohesion in essay drafts, students can turn to some of the “Rhetorical Reminders” Kolln presents at the end of the chapter on cohesion when they examine each other’s drafts:

“Have [the writer] anticipated [the] reader’s expectations?”

“Do [the writer’s] paragraphs profit from lexical cohesion, the repetition of words?”

“[Has the writer] used metadiscourse effectively to signal the reader where necessary?”

“[Has the writer] taken advantage of parallelism as a cohesive device?”

“[Has the writer] used specific details to support [any] generalizations?”

Teaching Students to Remain Authentic

No matter what personal experience students present in their writing, we need to ensure an authentic and rhetorically appropriate voice. As Kolln explains, “Clearly, it’s the rhetorical situation--the topic, the purpose, and the audience--that determines the tone” (108). One way to develop the writer’s voice, according to Kolln, is through metaphors. This comparison, in addition to being aligned with the rhetorical situation, should make “the reader stop and think about the topic in a new way” (120).

Therefore, another engagment opportunity for students includes listing out the metaphors they come across in the text. The close reading needed, the attention to detail, will contribute to their insights about how a writer structures a text. Again, instead of completing an inventory for the entire essay, students can focus on one section and even count the number of sentences between each metaphor to uncover another structural

element.

In Coates's essay, we encounter metaphors such as these:

"To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease."

"But a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can protect you only with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or succeeded at something much darker."

"There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body."

"That year I felt myself to be drowning in the news reports of murder."

"I was aware that these murders very often did not land upon the intended targets but fell upon great-aunts, PTA mothers, overtime uncles, and joyful children—fell upon them random and relentless, like great sheets of rain."

Through this exercise, students can begin to articulate how one metaphor connects to the next and to others. I might ask students (after they identify the specific metaphor and the two elements being compared) to explain how "to be naked before the elements of the world" connects to "the club of criminal justice" and the possibility of having his body erased which has some connection to "drowing in the news" and murders that fall "like great sheets of rain."

This could take us to a dark place. But it's a real place for so many young men of color. Understanding the structure of this piece can lead young people of all backgrounds to profoundly understand race relations in this country and move beyond the superficial response I got from students: "Yeah, there's racism. We know."

Ultimately, we want students to understand that they should present their nonfiction, as Zinsser explains, "with vigor, clarity, and humanity" (99).

But not everything needs to remain somber.

In Lars Eighner's "On Dumpster Diving," we experience the reality of someone who describes himself as a "scavenger" (14) who considers this "a sound and honorable niche" even though he recognizes he "would naturally prefer to live the comfortable, consumer life, perhaps--and only perhaps--as a slightly less wasteful consumer" (14) because of what he learned scavenging.

Eighner presents the experience of being homeless and suriving on what others throw away not only in a light-hearted way but in an expert one. His writing quickly takes readers to the second question of "What does it reveal?" as we begin to understand--in this context--he is the expert, we are the naïve ones.

In addition to the learning experiences mentioned above, students can engage with the structure of this text by considering the shifts in the writer's tone. The elements of humor embeddded in the cohesion, repetition, logos, ethos, and pathos can be highlighted. In some cases, the writer inserts casual expertise as when he educates us that "most forms of food poisioning seldom do lasting harm to a healthy person, but botulism is almost certainly fatal and often the first symptom is death" (15). Other times, the writer interjects a more

developed use of humor as in the entire paragraph where he describes his dog Lizbeth's "pas de bourée" when she notices fire ants by a dumpster as they scavange.

After students identify the uses of humor--in this or any other essay with humor--they can examine what the essay reveals and why this matters by, first, illustrating a few of the humorous passages. Then, they copy the sentence or sentences from the essay that describe the situation humorously. After that, they write their own serious caption of the illustration without the humor.

Finally, they can compare and contrast the rhetorical affect of using humor or not. They will hopefully uncover how the humor in Eighner more effectively encourages contemplation of the writer's public point against middle-class consumerism. The humor builds the writer's credibility and increases the reader's engagement because it's not a lecture. Instead of running the risk of grossing out readers with the situations scavengers experience, the writer decreases the level of discomfort with humor. While students will probably not accept the scavenger lifestyle, they'll begin to understand how to contemplate the implications of consumerism.

Students can begin to understand what Zinsser says about humor allowing us to "help us look at far older problems of the heart, the home, the family, the job and all the other frustrations of just getting from morning to night" (212). But, Zinsser cautions us not to "strain for laughs; humor is built on surprise, and you can only surprise the reader so often" (213).

A good exercise for any text that incorporates humor is to revisit the the classic rhetorical triangle. What's the relationship between the writer and the subject? In Eighner's essay, he lives this reality. What's the relationship between the subject and the reader? Most students have probably not experienced scavenging as a way of survival. Still, we need to be sensitive to the realities of students who might have. What's the relationship between the reader and writer? Can we trust the writer? The experiences Eighner presents should help students find the writer trustworthy. Finally, what's the subtext? What change does the writer want to promote? Here, Eighner wants us to reconsider consumerism. That's a well-grounded, socially responsible request.

"On Dumpster Diving" also opens up opportunities to help students examine the structure of humor when it fails. Responses to the questions above should help students understand why some topics should not be joked about.

Applying these concepts in their own writing

Ultimately, students absorb the guidelines of good writing when they apply them to their own personal essays. To increase the real-world connection, students can draft responses to personal-statement prompts. The Common Application prompts offer an accessible entry point into all kinds of topics. These are the 2019-2020 prompts:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

After comprehending and examing a personal essay's structure as indicated above, students should pause to reflect on the writing and reflect on what they valued. The reflection can include one or more of the elements we discussed above:

Public point

Logos: In what capacity does the writer address the reader?

Ethos: What style does the writer use?

Pathos: What attitude does the writer take toward the material?

Cohesion

Repetition

Metaphor

Tone or Voice

In a notebook, each student can document what he or she admired about the essay according to these elements. This way, students begin developing micro-drafts of ideas and structure that mirror the writing of professional essays. This should be handwritten to increase the engagement with the text.

The first part of the notebook entry can include some copying a portion of the professional writer's essay at the paragraph or sentence level. This forces students to pay attention to the minutiae: the punctuation, the rhythm, the word choice, the eloquence. Then, inspired by a thought-provoking prompt (such as the Common App prompts above), students can attempt to mirror the professional writer's style in their own writing about their own experience. If the student attempts to copy writing at the sentence level, he or she must write more than one sentence. The final part of the entry should be a brief description of what they are attempting to mirror.

To help build confidence and trust, a peer review of the writing by another student can consist of a few simple parts:

1. A short summary of what the reviewer sees
2. A compliment or two about the writing

3. A question or two the reader has about the content or the style

Not every attempt will be successful. But not every attempt will fail either. Writing experiences like this will lead students to become comfortable writers capable of making thoughtful observations about professional writing and competent writers who develop an authentic style that develops through the influence of reading the work of accomplished writers.

My hope is that this toolkit of sorts for high-school writing teachers helps engage students with complex texts beyond the literal level. The ideologies and practices compiled here will, hopefully, help students identify the structure of a text at the paragraph and sentence level, practice it, and mirror it in their own original writing.

Furthermore, my hope is that this toolkit encourages teachers to select socially conscious, thought-provoking essays to challenge high-school students to engage in conversations about contemporary issues that teachers sometimes refrain from because of professional insecurity or administrative skepticism. All of this is guided by a belief in the idea that students must be socially conscious, highly skilled writers addressing meaningful issues in order to amplify their voices and challenge social systems that limit young people's opportunities.

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Appendix: Implementing District Standards

The following Common Core Standards are covered in the “Lead and Ending” section of this unit as students uncover the “echoes” described by Zinsser in the mentor text and then find ways to apply these principles in their own writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.F Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.A Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

The following Common Core Standards are covered in the “Rhetoric of Writing” section of this unit as students understand what Kolln explains as “the grammatical choices available to them when they write and the rhetorical effects those choices will have on the reader.”

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.C Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.D Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

The following Common Core Standards are covered in the “Teaching Students to Remain Authentic” section of this unit as students make decisions about the relationships between topic, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.B Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

The following Common Core Standards are covered in the “Applying These Concepts in Their Own Writing” section of this unit as students draft, peer review, workshop, and revise their essays.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas,

concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.5 Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

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