



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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2019 Volume I: Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay

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## **Right Our World as Writers Who Are Readers: Acts of Resistance in Personal Memoirs and Public Arguments**

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### **Introduction**

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Resist much, obey little;  
Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved;  
Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city, of this earth,  
ever afterward resumes its liberty.

- Walt Whitman<sup>1</sup>

Your pen is the best defense against injustice. Your life story is the best argument to convince the naysayers to see the world your way. Writing is power. It takes wisdom to see your vulnerabilities as strengths. It takes courage to share who you are. And it takes faith and compassion to believe what you have written can impact people for a better tomorrow. I would argue that the modern essay inherently has a “private view” as well as a “public point,” something important the writer wants the readers to know. Writing modern nonfiction can “right” the world. As teachers, we want our students to “write” a world full of possibilities.

For most students learning to write, the path is nonfiction.<sup>2</sup> Reading and writing nonfiction like personal memoirs and open public letters can empower the self, others and the world. Memoirs are important primary sources that can help future researchers to understand people’s perception of an event at the time it occurred. With memoir, a writer can fuse emotions and logics into a political call for civic action. Stephen King recalled his former employer John Gould saying: “Write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open.”<sup>3</sup> Once a piece of writing is written as right as it can be, it longer belongs to the writer, it belongs to anyone who wants to read or criticize it.<sup>4</sup> As individuals, we write not only for ourselves, but as members of “We the People” who write to connect our private selves to the public world.

This YNI curriculum unit provides teachers creative methods to teach students how to write personal narratives with public messages. Upon completion of their personal narratives in the genre of memoir,

students will evaluate all of their public point, then group these points by topics, debate which point has the most weight, and choose a related social issue to jumpstart a collective essay. This class essay will be supported by extensive group research with the goal of sending it to the President of the United States, Members of Congress, Governor, Mayor, and/or editors of reputable news venues. The writer John McFee describes the writing process this way: “You begin with a subject, gather material, and work your way to structure from there. You pile up volumes of notes and then figure out what you are going to do with them, not the other way around.”<sup>5</sup> Together, students will construct a class essay in an organic matter of gathering relevant information in teams, composing team-arguments, and then comparing notes to organize the final structure. Ultimately, the entire class will co-author an argumentative essay that contains different aspects of all of their private lives while allowing their collective opinions to be heard and understood in a public forum. Through debates and compromises, the class will make a final proposal for a service learning project based on their united decision.

## Rationale

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I have selected complex and challenging excerpts from *The Norton Reader* as essay models. I believe students can be taught how to read and write better by carefully imitating great writers as they develop their own writing style. Writing is inherently a social and political act. It awakes creativity. Children as young as 3 years old “write” before they can read; they create narratives by scribbling lines, loops, and stick figures with crayons on paper, tables and sometimes even your freshly painted walls. Why then, once children go to school, does the act of writing become difficult, laborious and boring? Why do so many students hate writing, especially nonfiction essays that demand an understanding of composition and text structures? I believe most students have an aversion to writing because once school begins, the focus has switched from sharing ideas, exchanging experiences, and investigating the world to the tedious tasks of correcting sentences, punctuation and spelling, worrying about the passive voice, appropriating a gender-neutral language, and constantly chasing that “perfect word” for that “perfect sentence” in that “perfect paragraph” to make that “perfect essay.” How daunting! I imagine children’s joyful spirit and curiosity about writing being dampened and crushed from the moment they step into school for the first time. As school continues, fewer and fewer students believe in their own writing and writing abilities. Suddenly, writing has a wrong answer, a bad label, a rubric to follow, and a grade attached to it. Children, along with their writing, are being judged and evaluated on an arbitrary scale devoid of enjoyment, freedom, creativity and originality. Using complex texts in small doses will direct students to focus on how words are used to convey their thinking rather than how words must be used to write a correct sentence without mistakes.

Most people would concur: “Writing is hard” or “Writing is not fun.” Sometimes children and adults are even afraid of writing. They express their self-doubts with statements such as “I can’t write,” “I am not good enough,” “I hate writing,” or “writing is not for me.” Arguably, the brains of students younger than 10 years old (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders) may not be mature enough to handle abstract thinking demanded by essay writing. Yet the National Common Cores Standards expect students to write opinion, informational and narrative pieces starting at first grade. The pressure to write, rewrite, and rewrite again, and again can destroy the joy of writing and make students feel inadequate. What if the same process is viewed as an experiment to embrace thinking in the quest to figuring out how to put thoughts into words? What if reading good essays by skilled writers, imitating their writing styles, and discussing the effects of words and sentences are the

essential steps of learning how to write better? Even though the different modes of writing may demand different modes of thinking, I would argue that an essay can consist of narration, information and opinion. Creative nonfiction may be a world away from text-dependent analysis, but many different types of writing can also co-exist brilliantly in an essay. Nonfiction anthologies like *The Norton Reader* are packed with essays that weave personal experiences with convincing facts, poetic language, strong opinions and even viable solutions. If students write about themselves, their real-life experiences, and what they know best without the constant judgments, they will write in a more authentic way. In addition, the act of “students writing an essay together” can make the daunting task more enjoyable, more democratic, more socially interactive, and more culturally responsive to our increasingly diverse global society. If writing means using a mentor text as a roadmap, or working collaboratively with a more knowledgeable writer, children will be less afraid, and more willing to take risks with their writing.

### **Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Social Development Theory**

Before we write, we think about writing, we may talk about writing, we may dream about writing, we may even read and write about writing. The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed a theory that emphasizes three aspects of cognitive development: social interaction, the more knowledgeable other (MKO), and the zone of proximal development (ZPD).<sup>6</sup> It’s crucial for all learners, especially struggling students, to develop an internal dialogue before committing to undeveloped ideas in writing. When writing is personal and social, students will write more freely because they are writing about themselves and issues they care and know a lot about, and they can also ask each other for help. Quality writing demands the luxury of time to incubate internal dialogues, the comfort of a private space to write, and social opportunities to articulate, and share new ideas with others. Instead of being a lonely burden all the times, writing can be a private activity as well as a social event, an experiment, and a political act.

### **Benefits of Reading and Writing Personal Memoirs**

One of the biggest benefits of writing a memoir is student and family engagement. Here is a real-life example from my class: On the last days of the 2018-2019 school year, I asked my students to write a series of letters: one to a classmate who had improved significantly, one to me, and one to their future 21-year-old self. These letters were basically essays-in-disguise. One of my students (a native English speaker) sighed and said: “Poems are easier to write [than essays] because I can write what I want,” and then my other students chimed in with agreement. From experience, I notice how children love to write poems and personal narratives.

Both genres encourage free thinking and imagination. With poetry, students know they don’t need to worry too much about grammar rules. Therefore, they are more engaged and less likely to censor new ideas before putting them on paper. Similarly, when teachers encourage this attitude of free thinking with personal narratives such as memoirs, students will take more risks in developing their own unique and authentic voice. The writer William Dean Howells (1909) refers to autobiographies as “the most democratic province in the republic of letters” and Robert Sayre (1977) labels American biography as the “song of ourselves.”<sup>7</sup> Memoir allows individualistic, unrestricted and democratic expressions that are accessible and inclusive of people of different backgrounds in regards to race, ethnicity, religions, class, gender and sexual-orientations. Memoir is a genre that has long served as a threshold for most marginalized groups to gain status and recognition on the realm of literature.

### **Benefits of Public Argumentative Essays**

The 2nd part of my unit is about writing arguments together to develop a public point. For the past ten years,

I've used collaborative writing to include every student in the classroom as I teach them how to write text-dependent analyses, narratives, informational essays, research papers and opinion letters. The process of setting up the different teams can be time-consuming and challenging, but the amount of growth in students' self-confidence and writing abilities is monumental and contagious. In a group of 30 students, I would usually divide them into pairs or five groups of six based on different topics, themes, main ideas or opinions. Suddenly, struggling students who didn't like to write were talking a lot more, and they sometimes even argued passionately for their ideas to be included. High achievers were challenged by their peers to think more deeply and to elaborate in more details what they had written. Mastering the skill of arguments is essential in achieving success in a vast array of careers from science to social studies to math. Writing arguments help students to develop critical thinking and research skills, as well as the ability to defend their ideas to the opposition. In the practical world, the art of persuasion can boost greater self-esteem, help kids to deal with bullying in the playground and other day-to-day conflicts as well as open doors to future colleges and careers.

### **Benefits of Collaborative Writing (CW)**

As technology advances, there is a shift to CW in the fields of academia, business, high-tech, research, as well as interdisciplinary careers such as journalism, political science, advertising, public relations to name a few.<sup>8</sup> CW has become easier, quicker, more accessible and more fluid with the availability of mobile devices, social media and cloud-based formats such as Google Drive. In a CW group, student writers can rely on, support and challenge each other through a democratic process of sharing similar and opposing views. CW activities provide all writers, from emergent to advanced, a safety net to take more risks and utilize each other's strengths.<sup>9</sup> Writing together prepares students for higher academic learning and real-world employment.

## **Demographics**

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Teaching urban students how to read and write comes with a unique set of challenges as well as rare opportunities for personal and professional growth. The demographics of my school, Francis Scott Key School in Philadelphia, are highly diverse in their ethnic, cultural and language backgrounds. The languages spoken by this diverse group of multi-lingual students, teachers, administrators, parents and other community members had included: Arabic, Bengali, Burmese, Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), French, Hindi, Italian, Khmer, Korean, Laos, Nepali, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. About 54.7% of students are currently classified as English Language Learners (ELL), about 10% had been exited out of ELL service, and another 10% are children of immigrants who were born in the United States (never received ELL service, even though a language other than English is primarily spoken at home). That's an estimated total of 75% of students who are recent immigrants or children of immigrants.

I feel that I have a huge responsibility to teach my students in a culturally responsive way that is compatible with – as well challenging to – how their brains function in a language other than English. I believe it is important to teach struggling readers and writers how to use complex text as writing models. Reading “good writing” is the first step in becoming better readers and writers. As teachers, we often underestimate our students, especially ELL and Special Education students, by giving them below grade level work. When a struggling reader is able to read text two or three years below his or her grade level, it is not time to “just” cheer and celebrate, but it's also time to set higher goals and challenges. As teachers, we don't want to

promote a false sense of accomplishment and complacency that may cripple the growth of all learners. I believe it is equally important to make students feel comfortable as well as uncomfortable at different stages of learning. Easy goals will not force students to work hard, try new ideas and grow.

## Content Objectives

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### Professor Jessica Brantley, Reading for Writing Strategy and Writer's Workshop

Professor Jessica C. Brantley's YNI seminar titled *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* has altered my old beliefs about nonfiction. In our modern times, nonfiction does not have to be "entirely" objective, impersonal, fact-based and "boring" to read. The seminar was modeled after Yale's popular course, English 120. Participants read a large number of essays to serve as models of excellence, exploring how these writers crafted their personal experiences to create public argument. Participants also write a 1500-word essay according to a genre such as memoirs, profiles, cultural criticism, political argument, op-eds, and reviews. The heart of this seminar is using writer workshops for participants to critique each other's writing. During each workshop, the writer will speak first and explain the writing experience in terms of inspiration, process, successes and difficulties. Each critic has the task to write a one-page letter addressed to the writer noting what works well, what could be improved, and suggestions for their final draft.

*The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction* contains the majority of model essays read in this seminar. This anthology provides a variety of modern essays in the genres of personal memoirs and public arguments with depth and breadth from classic to contemporary authors.

### Personal Memoirs (Part One of the Unit)

A memoir is an account of a personal experience based on the person's life and past experiences. It is usually written in the first person. From *The Norton Reader*, I have selected the following personal narratives to serve as models for students to read and deconstruct:

Angelou, Maya. *Graduation*. 45-54.

Anzaldua, Gloria. *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*. 471-80.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*. 12-34.

Didion, Joan. *On Going Home*. 1-3.

Dillard, Annie. *An American Childhood*. 98-103.

Douglass, Frederick. *Learning to Read*. 404-408

Eighner, Lars. *On Dumpster Diving*. 55-64.

Franklin, Benjamin. *Learning to Write*. 484-487.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. *In the Kitchen*. 245-251.

Goode, JJ. *Single-Handed Cooking*. 280-283.

Hughes, Langston. *Salvation*. 947-949 Hurston, Zora Neale. *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*. 42-45.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *Tongue-Tied*. 461-465

Lee, Change-rae. *Coming Home Again*. 3-11.

Mairs, Nancy. *On Being a Cripple*. 64-74.

Rodriguez, Richard. *Aria*. 465-471.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*. 967-975.

Tobin, Lad. *Here Everything Is Possible*. 286-295.

Walker, Alice. *Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self*. 74-80.

Welty, Eudora. *One Writer's Beginnings*. 877-822

### **Public Arguments and Open Letters for CW (Part Two of the Unit)**

From *The Norton Reader*, I have selected the following list of argumentative essays and open letters as models. Close reading of these mentor text will help students to articulate their own public points, and construct effective arguments as they write collaboratively:

Asimov, Issac. *The Relativity of Wrong*. 824-829.

Bird, Caroline. *College is a Waste of Time and Money*. 428-436.

Bissel, Tom. *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*. 214-222.

Bolina, Jaswinder. Writing Like a White Guy: On Language, Race and Poetry. 496-505. Brooks, David. *The Gender Gap at School*. 390-392.

Carr, Nicholas. *Is Google Making Us Stupid?* 572-581.

Chief Seattle. *Letter to President Pierce, 1855*. 543-544.

Cunningham, Amy. *Why Women Smile?* 172-177.

Epstein, David. *Sports Should Be Child's Play*. 393-396.

FitzGerald, Frances. *Rewriting American History*. 786-793.

Foer, Franklin. *How Soccer Explains the American Culture War*. 350-358.

Jefferson, Thomas et al. *The Declaration of Independence*. 773-779.

Keillor, Garrison. *How to Write a Letter*. 505-507.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. 806-819.

King, Stephen. *On Writing*. 493-495.

Jones, Jeffrey Owen. *The Man Who Wrote the Pledge of Allegiance*. 793-796.

Petroski, Henry. *Falling Down Is Part of Growing Up*. 187-193.

Pilardi, Jo-Ann. *Immigration Problem Is About Us, Not Them*. 386-388.

Regan, Tom. *The Case of Animal Rights*. 670-680.

Singer, Peter. *What Should a Billionaire Give—And What Should You?* 640-651.

Staples, Brent. *Why Colleges Shower Their Students with A's*. 388-390.

### **William Zinnser, *On Writing Well***

The book *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* is a modern writing guide written by William Zinnser, a Yale writing professor. It is often credited as a suitable companion work to the classic *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White. The book is divided into four major parts: Principles, Methods, Forms and Attitudes. This curriculum unit will focus on Zinnser's concepts about: Writing About Yourself and the Sound of Your Voice.

Zinnser views nonfiction as literature and makes a potent argument that “good writing is good writing” no matter what form it takes and no matter what we call it.<sup>10</sup> I would go further to add that good writing, fiction or nonfiction, has the aesthetic, ethical and intellectual merits to change how its readers see, experience and understand the world. Zinnser advocates young writers to write about themselves because writing nonfiction like memoirs enables beginner writers to write about what they know, what they can easily observe and quickly find out. He writes: “Go with what seems inevitable in your own heritage. Embrace it and it may lead you to eloquence.”<sup>11</sup> Teachers have the ability as well as responsibility to motivate all writers, especially those who are struggling, to write no matter how they feel about their ability.

Memoirs can serve this purpose of getting students to write more freely and eloquently as they investigate about their own heritage, subjects that touch their own lives or experiences that they had lived. It is also crucial to have students understand that enjoyment, fear and confidence are inseparable with being a writer. Furthermore, memoir can support a student's personal struggle to figure out what is the sound and effect of their voice as they write.<sup>12</sup> Good writers make the readers feel that the writers enjoy writing and write for their readers, even when the writers don't feel like writing.<sup>13</sup> Beside teaching students to enjoy writing, teachers also need to motivate students to persevere when the writing gets difficult, when students are afraid of getting it all wrong, when students lose tracks of the purpose, or when students stop believing in the power of their voice. Memoirs can give students the opportunity to make sense of the world and to communicate their personal beliefs and values to impact themselves and people around them.

## **Virginia Woolf on Modern Essay and Author's Craft**

The question "What is a modern essay?" is an open-ended discussion. The following questions are important to consider and could help teachers and students to think critically as they come up with their own concept of what is a modern essay: Can a compelling argumentative essay or a personal memoir apply a sentimental-subjective attitude rather than a detached-objective point of view? An informal and democratic tone rather than a formal and authoritarian "know-it-all" voice? What about the idea of using the format of a poem such as Langston Hughes' *Will V-Day be Me Day Too* as an open letter? What other un-restrained forms can students use to pursue their individual or collective version of the truth rather than be forced to use an expected organization of beginning, middle and end? Is essay short? If so, how short or how long? Can it be both serious and humorous? What do you write on? Paper, computer, on the wall, on the ground? Where do you write? In a room by yourself? In a public space like a cafe? On a shared Google Doc as a whole class?

In *Modern Essay* (1922), Virginia Woolf wrote that the essay "should give pleasure... It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last... A novel has a story, a poem rhyme; but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life – a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure?"<sup>14</sup>

## **Benjamin Franklin, Deconstructing Prose into Poem and Poem into Prose**

If students are encouraged to write routinely with the freedom and intensity like that of Benjamin Franklin, their writing will improve significantly. At the age of sixteen, Franklin taught himself how to write better by copying the work of writers of his times. He read and re-read original texts, butchered the text with his own writing in the attempt to write similarly or better. Then he composed the prose into poetry and back again. Franklin explains his learning process of deconstructing the original text: "I also sometimes jumbled my Collections of Hints into Confusion, and after some Weeks, endeavor'd to reduce them into the best Order, before I began to form the full Sentences, and complete the Paper. This was to teach me Method in the Arrangement of Thoughts."<sup>15</sup> Most importantly, Franklin was obsessed and wrote religiously whenever he had a free moment.

## **Frederick Douglass, Learning How to Read and Write**

Like Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass was obsessed with learning how to read and write. Douglass had the similar tenacity, creativity and determination as he taught himself how to read and write. He made learning a priority in improving who he was. Douglass learned how to form letters by watching ship's carpenters write single letters on lumber; then he practiced forming the letters on fences, walls, and ground around the city.<sup>16</sup> Douglass master's wife, Mrs. Auld, did teach him the alphabet and a few words before her husband forbade her to continue. Douglass went to the street for private lessons; he would give bread to poor white boys in exchange for reading lessons and challenge them to see who can write better. When he was left alone in his master's house, Douglass secretly wrote on his master's son's discarded copybooks.

At the age of twelve, Douglass read a book called *The Columbian Orator*, which contains a dialogue between a master and a slave.<sup>17</sup> The master presents an argument for slavery, the slave refutes every point and eventually convinces his master to set him free. Douglass started to see reading and writing as a ticket out of slavery. In order to teach reading and writing effectively, allow students the similar kind of time, space, freedom and challenge to dissect and reconstruct their original essays as Douglass had done.



## Nicholas Carr, Technology and Google Search

In his essay *Is Google Making Us Stupid*, Nicholas Carr explains how the Net has not only altered what we read, but how we read. This shift may have resulted in changing how we think. A by-product of this new way of thinking may also have created a new sense of who we are.<sup>18</sup> We used to read books, but now we read hyperlinks of disassociated content at a frantic speed on our laptops, phones and other digital devices. We have become decoders of information rather than critical analysts of ideas. Similarly, writing suffers the double-edged sword of the convenient clicking of the “cut” and “paste” commands; we can obtain a motherlode of “useful and useless” information regardless if we can actually afford the time and energy to do the work to mentally digest it all.

How do you teach students to read and write an essay in our modern times? The internet has made plagiarism increasingly tempting for our students, yet how do we balance the commodification of intellectual property with the right to free access of information? If the way we read and write in the modern era is changing how we think, therefore who we are, then doesn't it make sense that as teachers, we may want to change with the wave of this new phenomenon, as to how we teach our students how to read and write? I propose and advocate for teachers to slow down, and for students to hand write complex sentences in their notebooks, study these sentences carefully as models, reread them out loud multiple times, and re-organize the words to find new insights.

### Description of the Constitutional Convention Essay Model for CW

The writer's workshop can be modified and integrated with the collaborative writing process. For the public arguments, teachers will use a model akin to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where 55 delegates (representing 12 states except Rhode Island) gathered in Independence Hall to work on how to strengthen the national government.<sup>19</sup> The delegates (later known as Founding Fathers and Framers of the Constitution) had two written documents to work with: The Articles of Confederation and the Declaration of Independence. George Washington presided over the Convention. Similarly, teachers may need to preside over the progress. Students will have their individual memoirs to work into public arguments as they debated over controversial topics. Our Founding Fathers argued over the issues of slavery, representation and taxes. Students may argue over current topics such as immigration, gun control, divorce rates, etc.

Who actually wrote the Constitution?<sup>20</sup> In short, it was a collaboration. James Madison wrote the document that formed the model. The Framers were influenced by the writing of John Adams' “Defense of the Constitution of the Government of the United States of America”, Thomas Paine's “Common Sense”, John Locke (1632-1704) of England and Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) of France. The delegates debated the pros and cons of each issue, proposed plans and compromises before they were able to complete a rough draft. A Committee of Style was appointed to create a final draft. The final document was signed by 39 of the 55 delegates, some had already left Philadelphia, and three delegates refused. The Convention took nearly 4 months of deliberation. Similarly, the class argumentative essay will require students to actively debate, plan, compromise and write in groups or as a whole class.

## Teaching Strategies

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### **Part One (Personal Memoirs): Who Said a MEMOIR Is Only About “ME”?**<sup>21</sup>

The first part of my curriculum unit begins with getting students to read and study exemplar memoirs as they make connections to their personal lives. I have developed a series of innovative activities that teachers can use to help students to read and write memoirs with greater understanding, enjoyment, freedom, creativity and power. As students read model essays by well-established writers, they will learn how writers assemble words purposefully to achieve the desired effects. It’s also essential that time and space are invested for each memoir to go through a series of revision, peer review, discussion of writer’s craft, and face-to-face conference. Otherwise, the memoir will just be another meaningless assignment.

Over the course of a marking period, approximately 6 to 10 weeks, students will read model excerpts of essays as they compose memoirs based on a personal experience that is vital in defining who they are. Students will read mentor texts as models of good writing, keep irrelevant ideas from their reading, tweak the sound of their voice with writer’s craft, and participate actively during writer’s workshop. Through sharing platforms like Google Docs and other online writing programs, each draft will go through a cycle of (at least 3) reviews by peers and teachers. The final drafts of these personal narratives will be arranged into categories based on their political points. It is important for students to publish their memoirs on a writing website or as a class book through self-publishing or an online publishing company. Having students read their essays aloud is another way to give them feedback, allow them to polish their writing and develop better writing skills. When writings are published together and given a public audience, it adds a sense of urgency, legitimacy, value and shared purpose to the work and process.

#### **General Theme for Memoir: My Heritage and Who Am I?**

My students whimpered when I give them the typical writing assignments with a 1 to 4 number rubrics to follow. The Pennsylvania Writing Assessment scores students on five basic domains: focus, content, organization, style and conventions of language. Research paper, informational essay and textual dependent analysis will get a louder groan. But if I ask my students to write about themselves or a subject they love, their faces relax and they write more. So, a memoir is an ideal format to encourage students to write. A memoir is an account of a personal experience based on the person’s life and past experiences. It is usually written in the first person.

Try this approach with your students to get the maximal results, read aloud the following quote: “The best gift you have to offer when you write personal history is the gift of yourself. Give yourself permission to write about yourself, and have a good time doing it.”<sup>22</sup> Or the teacher can say: “I will give you the permission to write freely. Be yourself and your readers will follow you anywhere.”<sup>23</sup> Ask students to write about a truly meaningful past experience that had made them who they are. Remind them to imagine the emotional impacts their personal narratives could have on their readers. This approach would also allow students to get to know each other better and for the class to grow closer as a community of learners.

#### **Introduce the Term “Memoir” and the Six-Word Memoir Project**

In addition to the above approach, introduce students to the term “memoir” with a low-risk online project: Challenge students to tell their life story in exactly 6 words and publish it on the website

*sixwordsmemoirs.com*. There are over 1 million submissions and counting. The idea was said to have started with Ernest Hemingway being challenged to write a memoir with only six words. His response was “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”<sup>24</sup> In 2006, Larry Smith, founder of SMITH magazine, started the Six-Word Memoir Project. The project has been featured in NPR, *The New Yorker*, inside Honest Tea bottle caps, and thousands of blogs and YouTube videos.<sup>25</sup>

### **Reading for Writing Lessons (Imitating Model Essays and Daily Routine)**

Remind students that it is an ongoing learning process as they read essays in order to write better. After establishing a reading and writing routine, use essays from *The Norton Reader* or complex nonfiction text of your choice to model good reading and writing. These essays can also serve as the foundation for discussing opening sentence, ending sentence, sensory details, writer’s craft, themes, main ideas, plot sequence, and text structure. Refer to “Classroom Activities” for sample lessons and excerpts from *The Norton Reader*.

During the school year, establish a daily writing routine with classwork and homework. Have students write every day in a wide range of formats, purposes and situations. For instance, students can write for 15 minutes as first thing in the morning, or write for 15 minutes at home to reflect on what they learn that day. Teachers can also generate a weekly or monthly list of prompts that includes student input as well as offers choices. Sample prompts: I remember...; My family has a secret...; I am home for. Sample Prompts for Arguments: An unfinished argument with myself; Who will win...; I believe in...; I don’t believe in...; I want to change.

### **Keeping a Notebook for Yourself**

In her essay *On Keeping a Notebook*, Joan Didion explains how keeping a notebook is different from writing in a diary or recording the world as it is.<sup>26</sup> Yes, both a diary and a notebook are private. But her way of keeping a notebook is more like her personal window to the world of possibilities. She explains how one person’s notebook means nothing to another person because what is written may trigger memories and ideas other than what is actually written on the page.

Keeping a notebook is a great strategy. It allows students the space and freedom to jolt down, sketch out, and collect incomplete thoughts and soft impressions of the external world. These private notebooks can serve as memory scrapbooks of writings, drawings, photos as well as scrap papers like tickets, candy wrappers, and news clippings. Teachers often model the “pre-writing” or “brainstorming” process by using graphic organizers to organize ideas. There is nothing wrong with supporting students with graphic organizers, but sometimes so much emphasis is put on how ideas are organized that the ideas can mysteriously be lost in the process. Therefore, it is crucial for students to collecting ideas without the demand of pleasing the teacher.

At the beginning of the school year, have student keep a notebook to record inner thoughts, ideas, observations, sounds and interesting conversations. Let students keep at least one private notebook, but make them accountable with the number of entries and the amount of time spent writing. Have students write every day in a variety of different situations: silently or with music, sitting down or standing up, in the classroom or during a walking tour around the neighborhood, by themselves or with a partner, handwrite with a pen or type on a laptop. I would also advocate for students to free writing at least once a week together as a class. Here free writing can take the form of writing nonstop for 10 minutes without taking the pencil off the page. If students need writing prompts to jumpstart their ideas, it is better to use prompts that solicit open-ended responses, so as to leave room for creative thinking.

## Writer Workshops and the Sound of Your Voice

Students will begin to compose their memoirs after a week of “reading for writing” lessons, activities, and other writing experiments. Writer workshops will be held in small group of 4 to 6 students during the Literacy Block while other students are working independently on other literacy center activities. During the revision stage, students will share their drafts online for peer and teacher feedback with at least three people.

What is the sound of your writing voice? Zinnser speaks about how to find your voice that the readers will enjoy. The process is a matter of taste as well as a matter of practicing to say the same things in different ways. So, it is important to allow students opportunities to investigate and even imitate the voices of excellent writers and orators. Let students read sample personal narratives from online collections such as *longform.com* as well as excerpt from *The Norton Reader*. The website *TeenInk* publishes essays written by teens from around the country. Students can read about teens struggling with everything from racism to self-image and depression as well as descriptions of cultural celebrations and dance performances.

What is the sound of your speaking voice? Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “Speech is power: Speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel,”<sup>27</sup> It is crucial to have students read aloud excerpts of modern essays as well as listen to landmark speeches. By reading out loud their own and their classmates’ personal narratives, students will start to recognize how a writer’s voice reveals his or her authentic self. The actual sound of a voice can be quite different from how it is written on a page. Have students listen to speeches such as Martin Luther King, Jr’s “I Have a Dream” (1963), Hillary Clinton’s “Women’s Rights Are Human Rights” (1995), Aung San Suu Kyr’s “Freedom from Fear” (1990), Maya Angelou’s “On the Pulse of Morning” (1993) as well as speeches by kids on YouTubes such as Kid President, Adora Svitak’s “What adults can learn from kids?” (2010), and Sophie Cruz’s Speech at the Women’s March on Washington (2017). Use free websites such as *ttsreader.com* to allow students to record their voice reading as well as have their written works read out loud by a computer-generated voice or another classmate.

## Part Two (Public Arguments): Who Said Writing Has to Be a Solitary Pursuit?

The second part of this unit is an innovative approach for students to write together using all of the public points generated from their memoirs to write a class essay. Students will benefit from reading examples of mentor texts from *The Norton Reader* as they read to learn how to write arguments effectively. According to the writer John McFee, “The approach to [essay] structure in factual writing is like returning from a grocery store with materials you intend to cook for dinner.”<sup>28</sup> Remind students that writing an argument is an organic process.

To help students to define their public points, ask questions such as: What is the purpose of your writing? What emotional impact do you want your audience to have? What wisdom do you want your readers to leave with? These questions will help students to develop a written approach for their public points. Some possible political topics to help students to construct their public points include: childhood, milestones, class, cultures, educating & schooling, gender, home and family, law & justice, life & death, pop culture, race, religion, politics, death and life struggles. Each “public point group” will research, write and strategize a verbal argument to convince the entire class to choose their political issue for one collaborative essay.

This approach is deeply rooted with my past successes with two Philadelphia-based programs: Need in Deed and the Lenfest Citizenship Essay Challenge. Need in Deed is a service-learning program that promotes student voice in the classroom. Over the course of a school year, students are asked to choose one social issue (such as mental health, homelessness, gun control, animal cruelty or child abuse) to research

extensively, interview community partners and experts for possible solutions, and propose a service-learning project to benefit the targeted audience. The Lenfest Citizenship Challenge is an annual essay contest sponsored by the Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement, specifically for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms. Each class is asked to write a civic essay answering a challenge question. Previous questions include: “Should the United States Constitution be amended to eliminate the Electoral College system for selecting the President and replace it with the national popular vote? If not, why? If so, why and how?” (2016); Should the U.S. Constitution be amended to impose term limits on members of Congress and the Supreme Court? Why or why not? If so, what should the limits be? (2017); and Why is the First Amendment important to you? (2018).

### **The Constitutional Convention Essay Model for CW**

After students have been divided into committees based on their public points, each committee will elect a facilitator, a notetaker, a writer, a reporter, a time keeper and a tie-breaker to write and present a speech to be delivered to the whole class. The challenge is to get ALL of the students to agree on ONE public point to do further research before writing a public letter. In order to compose a successful argumentative essay as a class, it is obvious that the teachers need to know their students and have a good handle on the content knowledge needed for the essay. However, even if a teacher doesn’t know their students well or doesn’t have a lot of content knowledge, the collaborative writing approach will allow more opportunities for students to take on the expert roles while the teacher facilitates the writing process. This type of social interaction creates the atmosphere needed to build a community of learners and teachers. Before the class begins writing together, the teacher needs to organize the student groups and the research topics strategically. Teachers should group students homogeneously or heterogeneously according to gender, background, race, language skills, reading levels, writing abilities, personalities, oratorical skills, and/or leadership skills.

For instance, with the Lenfest Essay Challenge in 2017, I divided 32 students into 6 groups of 4 or 6 students. Because I had 6 groups, we as a class decided on the following 6 arguments to begin our research about term limits. For the 2017 Question, I divided the class into 6 debate teams. Team 1: Too Much Power v. Band-aid Solution. Team 2: Abolish Seniority v. Fight Ageism. Team 3: Campaign Fundraising and Lobbyists v. Appointments. Team 4: New Candidates v. Experienced Veterans. Team 5: Career Politicians v. Non-bipartisan Judges. Team 6: Amendment Changes v. Leave the Constitution Alone.

After dividing a class into their subgroups, teach students some common argumentative strategies. Zinsser states that all writing is ultimately a question of solving a problem.<sup>29</sup> Collaborative writing is inquisitive and culturally responsive to the needs of all learners; it is a way to include every student regardless of language proficiency, gender difference and academic abilities. The challenge is to get students to agree on what would unite the essay as one without losing the differences contributed by each individual. Zinsser suggests the following questions to ask and I have changed the pronoun “I” to “we”.<sup>30</sup> In what capacity are we going to address the reader? Reporter? Average person? What pronoun and tense are we going to use? What style? Impersonal reportorial? Personal but formal? Personal and casual? What attitude are we going to take? Involved? Detached? Judgmental? Ironic? Amused? How much do we want to cover? What one point do we want to make?

### **General Theme for Argumentative Essays: What Does It Mean to Be American?**

Besides using argumentative topics, students can also use the theme of American Identity to define who they are as a community. Instead of a collection of writings by different writers, students would produce one effective essay that includes multiple writers with multiple opinions that also honors their unique American

voices. Writing a cohesive essay together forces students to take a stand, articulate the issue, and defend their position. The purpose of incorporating personal narratives is to get students to see that their life stories are not only important in their own lives, but also have political impact for other people. Writing helps students to understand that when we withhold things that make us feel weak, we are actually withholding ourselves from knowing ourselves, and our political power. Flexible grouping is necessary to enrich and accommodate the social, intellectual and procedural complexity demanded by working together.

### **Five Basic Text Structures in Informational Essay**

One way to help students to read and write better is to teach them how to identify text structures in informational essays. Text structures are not the same as text features such as headings, subheadings, table of contents, index, glossary, bold words, pictures and caption, sidebars, maps, and labeled diagrams. Basically, text structure is about the overall organization of an essay. In contrast, text features are all the parts that are not the main body of the essay. Common text structures of informational essays include description, chronological order, cause & effect, compare & contrast, and problem & solution. Research by the National Institute for Literacy (2007) shows that when students are explicitly taught to identify text structure as they read and write, they understand the material better.<sup>31</sup> Signal words such as “about”, “first, second and last”, “as a result”, “similarities”, “differences” and “because” can help students to identify the text structure and have a better grasp of the text they are reading and writing.

### **Five Types of Claim Statements in Argumentative Essays**

In most argumentative essays, writers use one or more (disputable) claim statements to persuade the readers to accept a position. A claim statement is sometimes called a thesis statement or a premise. A strong claim statement is specific and focused. Avoid using general words like “good,” “bad,” “everyone,” “never,” and “always.” The five basic types of claim statements are based on: 1) fact, 2) definition, 3) value, 4) cause & effect and, 5) policy.

Here are examples of the five basic types of claim statements from *The Norton Reader*. Fact Claim: “Leon Lefkowitz, chairman of the department of social studies at Central High School in Valley Stream, New York, interviewed 300 college students at random, and reports that 200 of them didn’t think that the education they were getting was worth the effort.”<sup>32</sup> Definition Claim: “His grandmother, however, said, ‘The cat was born in the oven. Does that make him bread?’”<sup>33</sup> Value Claim: “ More interesting to me is what games can do and how they make me feel while they are doing it.”<sup>34</sup> Cause & Effect Claim: “Each time the bridge of our body falls down, we build it up again.”<sup>35</sup> Policy Claim: “The target we should be setting for ourselves is not halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty, and without enough to eat, but ensuring that no one, or virtually no one, needs to live in such degrading conditions.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Argumentative Essay Text Structure Methods**

After students have ample practices on how to identify a claim statement, support them as they establish the overall structure of their argumentative essays. Here are three helpful methods to outline the overall organization of an argument: Aristotelian (Classical), Rogerian and Toulmin. Allow students time to investigate the similarities and differences among the three types of arguments. The Aristotelian Method argues an issue using evidence and refutation. The Rogerian Method argues an issue emphasizing similarity with your opponent’s belief. The Toulmin Method argues an issue emphasizing the strength of evidence. Teachers may want to put students in teams according to their public points and assign any of the three types of arguments.

Have students extend their one paragraph-argument by using headings of the method they have chosen: 1) introduction, background, proposition, proof, refutation, and conclusion for the Aristotelian Method; 2) problem, opposing views, understanding statement, position, contexts and benefits for the Rogerian Method; 3) data, claim, warrants qualifiers, rebuttals and backing for the Toulmin Method. Another more general method is to have students structure an argument with a hook, a claim statement, supporting evidences, a rebuttal and conclude with a proposal.

### **Rhetorical Strategies**

Explain to students how writers use rhetorical strategies to achieve certain purpose and effect on their audiences. These rhetorical strategies can be divided into 5 different tracks: pathos (emotion), big names (experts), ethos (character of writer), logos (reason), and Kairos (timeliness). Challenge students to develop their own unique voice and author's craft as they decide which rhetorical strategies would be most effective for the argumentative class essay. Lastly, as a whole class, make a simplified diagram as a schematic representation to illustrate the overall structure of the class essay. Then the class may want to label the diagram with annotated notes, labels, topics, and other connections to evaluate their class argument.

### **Letter Writing and Letter Format**

Have students write their arguments in a letter format will give them a purpose and an audience. Here are some examples of writing prompts teachers may want to use: Write a letter to your future child, to a famous person, to the President of the United States, to the school principal, to an inanimate object, to your biggest fear, to yourself in the voice of someone else.

Langston Hughes' poem titled "Will V-Day Be Me-Day?" acts like a public open letter as well as a poem. A letter poem uses the idea and form of letter, and applies poetic devices like figurative language. The first two lines "Over There, World War II" define the setting and act like a mailing address for the letter to be sent oversea. The next two lines read: "Dear Fellow Americans, I write this letter..." and at the end of the poem, the speaker signed off with "Sincerely, GI Joe."<sup>37</sup> The poem is written in the first person by an African-American man who felt that the victory won after WWII was not really a victory for "me, a black man." The speaker raises many concerns about his future as a black man returning to America after the war. He is asking thought-provoking questions such as: Will you herd me in a Jim Crow car like cattle or will you stand up like a man at home and take your stand for Democracy?<sup>38</sup> The poem's speaker continues to explain how white and black American soldiers were segregated during combat, but after WWII, segregation was still a practice at home. There was no "Double V" as African Americans had hoped. Hughes' letter poem can serve as a template for students to jolt down key ideas and questions for their argumentative essays.

### **Speech Writing and Oratorical Mastery**

Writing is an abstract, voluntary and conscious activity, in contrast to day-to-day oral speech which is often a spontaneous, involuntary and nonconscious activity.<sup>39</sup> Public speaking falls between these two activities. In order to become a great public speaker, students need to be prepared, memorize concepts (not script), make eye contact, show poise, convey confidence, make words flow, and connect with the audience. Therefore, it is important to allow students time to practice speaking, and not just reading aloud their written arguments. Pair them with a partner or in a small group to practice, practice, practice and keep at it! As reading will improve students' writing, the speaking will also improve their writing and reading abilities.

## Classroom Activities

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### Part One: Personal Memoirs (1<sup>st</sup> Marking Period, September to November)

After establishing a writing routine during the first marking period, introduce students to the term “memoir” and discuss what it is. Challenge students to write their life story in exact six words. After sharing and evaluating each other’s work, encourage students to publish these short memoirs on [www.sixwordmemoirs.com](http://www.sixwordmemoirs.com). In addition, teachers can conduct the following 5 reading and writing activities on a weekly basis to support students through their writing process of memoirs. I’ve provided excerpts from *The Norton Readers*, but teacher may want to use non-fiction essays, articles, or passages their ELA, Social Studies, Science and Math curricula.

#### Activity 1.1: Google Search Meaningful Sentences

Student will be able to use nouns and adjectives to find relevant and meaningful sentences online in order to use these sentences as model texts to write their memoirs. Procedures: In their notebooks, have students write down 3 nouns and 3 adjectives to describe themselves. For instance: leader, dancer, boy, positive, silly, brave. Show students how to google search to get quotes and sentences with one or a combination of these words. Model the procedures with examples such as “brave quote” or “leader, silly, sentence” to find sentences that they may want to use for their memoirs. Have students handwrite at least 3 sentences in their notebooks. Example: “Fortune always favors the brave, and never helps a man who does not help himself.”<sup>40</sup> Students can use this method to jumpstart ideas, but they must re-shape the sentences to compose their own sentences. Another similar activity is the “Six-Word Memoir Project.” During this activity, it is important to discuss plagiarism and intellectual property.

#### Activity 1.2: Re-write Model Essay’s Leading and Ending Sentences

Student will be able to close-read the lead and ending sentences of a non-fiction text to reinvent their own lead and ending sentences for their memoirs in order to establish a situation, introduce themselves as the narrators and organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally. Procedures: Select a non-fiction essay from *The Norton Reader* or your class reading list. In their notebooks, have students copy a lead sentence on the left side of a page and on the opposite side (right side) copy an ending sentence. Review the parts of speech: noun, pronoun, adjective, determiner, verb, adverb, preposition, conjunction, and interjection. Teacher choose a part of speech (ex.: nouns) to investigate. Students use a black marker to “erase” that particular part of speech (ex.: all the nouns). Students re-write the lead and ending sentences by substituting nouns to tell their own life stories. Scaffold students with vocabulary lists, online dictionaries and thesaurus. Below is an example from the essay “Graduation” by Maya Angelou, (45-55).

Lead Sentence: The children in STAMPS trembled visibly with anticipation.

Lead Sentence: The \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ trembled visibly with \_\_\_\_\_.

Example Re-write: The students in school trembled visibly with fear.

Ending Sentence: If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness.



Ending Sentence: If \_\_\_\_\_ were a \_\_\_\_\_ much given to revealing \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ might raise \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to the \_\_\_\_\_ of our \_\_\_\_\_, but \_\_\_\_\_ cured \_\_\_\_\_ of that \_\_\_\_\_.

Example Re-write: If brothers were a nation much given to revealing love, sisters might raise dollars and pennies to the hope of our peace, but rivalry cured siblings of that ending.

### **Activity 1.3: Deconstructing a Model Essay to Craft an Event Sequence**

Student will be able to deconstruct an essay in order to use its sentence structures to craft a sequence of major events for their memoirs. Procedure: Make copies of the following paragraph sentences from Douglass' essay *Learning to Read* from *The Norton Reader*, 404-408. Students will copy one sentence per page in their notebook. In pairs, students will discuss Douglass' style of writing in terms of sentence structure, and write a new but similar sentence about themselves or their experiences. Students might use these new self-generated sentences for their memoirs. Optional: Have students draw a picture under each sentence to illustrate Douglass' or their own mental images associated with the sentence. I recommend using the 1<sup>st</sup> sentence of each paragraph of Douglass' essay *Learning to Read*:

[1<sup>st</sup> sentence of paragraph 1] I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years.

[1<sup>st</sup> sentence of paragraph 2] 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.

[1<sup>st</sup> sentence of paragraph 3] From this time, I was most narrowly watched.

[1<sup>st</sup> sentence of 4] The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street.

[1<sup>st</sup> sentence of paragraph 5] I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon my heart.

[1<sup>st</sup> sentence of paragraph 6] In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation.

[1<sup>st</sup> sentence of paragraph 7] I often found myself regretting my own existence...

[1<sup>st</sup> sentence of paragraph 8] The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by...

[Last Sentence] Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.<sup>41</sup>

### **Activity 1.4: Develop the Plot**

Students will be able to read and analyze a leading, a middle, and an ending sentence of a model memoir and construct a plot in order to write narratives to develop real experiences using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. Procedures: In a whole group, the teacher read aloud a lead, middle and end sentence of a model memoir such as *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel (12-34). Lead: "Like many fathers, mine

could occasionally be prevailed on for a spot of 'airplane.'" Middle: "I grew to resent the way my father treated his furniture like children, and his children like furniture." End: "But I acted as if he were already gone." Next, the teacher models a think aloud to complete a plot diagram to imagine the different possibilities of: 1) rising action, 2) climax; 3) falling action, 4) conflict and, 5) resolution. Possible teacher's plot summary: The narrator's father used to play games with her (rising action). The narrator "resent" the father for not showing love and care for his children; this sentence foreshadows something terribly wrong is about to happen (climax). The father did something so hateful that the narrator pretends the father longer exists (falling action). The father was absent emotionally (conflict). The narrator pretended she didn't have a father (unresolved solution).

For guided practice in small groups, the teacher can use the following from *Tongue-Tied* by Maxine Hong Kingston (461-465). Lead: If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker. Middle: My silence was thickest— total— during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. End: Not all of the children who were silent at American school found voice at Chinese school. Possible plot summary: The narrator sees her behaviors would have been unacceptable if she was living in China (rising action). The narrator did not talk for 3 years in school; she made black paintings to express herself in silence (climax). The narrator was able to find her voice in Chinese school, but not everybody did (falling action). The narrator was silent in school (conflict), and discovered solace in Chinese school (solution).

#### **Activity 1.5: Read, Cut, Paste and Rewrite the 1<sup>st</sup> Paragraph**

Students will be able to read the first 150 to 250 words of a variety of personal narratives by model writers in order to orient the reader by establishing a situation, introducing a narrator and characters and organizing an event sequence that unfolds naturally. Procedures: Choose the first paragraph of an essay. Example: *On Dumpster Diving* by Lars Eighner. Make a handout of the paragraph in large font with double line space. Teacher will read aloud the paragraph with a think aloud. Also have students read aloud at least three more times (in whole groups, small groups and in pairs). In small groups, students cut the paragraph into strips, then cut each strip into word phrases (such as Long before). Put the phrases in a zip-lock bag and scramble them randomly by hand. Let student re-construct the original paragraph to the best of their abilities using the scrambled phrases without looking at the original paragraph. Post students' works on the chart papers for comparison. Discuss choices and meanings. Recommended text for this activity is the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph of the essay *On Dumpster Diving* by Lars Eighner:

Long before I began Dumpster diving I was impressed with Dumpsters, enough so that I wrote the Merriam Webster research service to discover what I could about the word Dumpster. I learned from them that it is a proprietary word belonging to the Dempster Dumpster company. Since then I have dutifully capitalized the word, although it was lowercased in almost all the citations Merriam Webster photocopied for me. Dempster's word is too apt. I have never heard these things called anything but Dumpsters. I do not know anyone who knows the generic name for these objects. From time to time I have heard a wino or hobo give some corrupted credit to the original and call them Dipsy Dumpsters.<sup>42</sup>

#### **Part Two: Public Arguments (2<sup>nd</sup> Marking Period: December to February)**

After students have written their memoirs, teacher will use the memoirs as a springboard for a class essay.

Allow students time to discuss the public points of their memoirs and present them to each other. Teacher may want to model a think aloud with a graphic organizer to compare and contrast the differences and similarities between their private views and public points. Lead students to define a public point as the most important message the writer wants the readers to react to or do something about. The following classroom activities will help support students through their public arguments and class essay.

### **Activity 2.1: Forming Debate Teams Based on Public Points**

Students will be able to write and present an argument of their public points in order to persuade others to view their public point as the most important issue to write a class essay. Procedures: As a whole group activity, make a list of possible public points. Have students construct the rules, protocols and structure of their debate teams. Ask students to find one person with the similar public point, and collaboratively write a paragraph listing 3 reasons why their point is important. Type all the paragraphs on a sharing platform like Google Docs. Consolidate the public points from 32 to 16. Repeat this process from 16 to 8, from 8 to 4, from 4 to 2, and eventually from 2 to 1 cohesive paragraph. Even though CW is a group effort, the tasks can be divided and conducted in pairs or individually. Allow students time to discuss, practice and research information to support their arguments. It is just important to consolidate different public points as it is to cut out unrelated ideas.

Optional activity: When the class has decided on 4 major public points, have each team stands on one of the four corners of the classroom to start a debate. Each team will present their written argument and figure ways to persuade members of the other teams to agree with them and get them to physically move to their corner. Take time to repeat this process until all the students are standing together at one corner of the room. Possible social issues: Is college a waste of time and money? Why video games matter? Is there a gender gap in school? Is Google making us stupid? Should the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment be amended with more gun control laws?

### **Activity 2.2: Read and Identify Claim Statements of Model Essays**

Students will be able to read and identify the claim statements as fact, definition, value, cause & effect and/or policy in order to write a claim statement supporting a public point with valid information. Procedures: Discuss what is a claim statement (a disputable statement in an argument to persuade its readers to accept). Define the five different types of claim statements. Use the following questions. Fact claim: Is domestic violence a major problem for children? Definition claim: What is domestic violence? Value claim: How important is it to report domestic violence? Cause & effect claim: What are the causes and effects of domestic violence? Policy claim: What can children do when they witness domestic violence?

Next, have students find evidences to support or refute these questions. Ask students what if they are not able to find evidences, does it mean the claim is false? What is a false claim? What is a true claim? Teach students how to cite their evidences to establish credibility and give credits to the original source. Explain there are different citation styles (MLA, Chicago, APA) and how to use citation websites such as EasyBib and Citation Machine.

### **Activity 2.3: Read and Identify Text Structures of Arguments**

Students will be able to read a paragraph of a model argumentative essay, identify its text structure as description, chronology, comparison, cause & effect, or problem & solution, and then choose the Aristotelian, Rogerian or Toulmin method in order to collaboratively write a public argument. Procedures: Introduce students to the 5 basic text structures: description, chronology, comparison, cause & effect and problem &

solution. Review the following signal words as clues in identifying the type of text structures. Signal words for description: “is, are,” Chronology: “first, next, last, date, time, year.” Comparison: “similar, different, same, in contrast.” Cause & effect: “As a result, if & then, since, positive, negative.” Problem & solution: “Because.” Students will write a paragraph for their argument using one or more text structures.

#### **Activity 2.4: Rhetorical Strategies: Pathos, Big Names, Logics, Ethos and Kairos**

Students will be able to read excerpts of argument essays to identify sentences that use the following rhetorical strategies: pathos (emotion), big names (expertise), logics (reasons), ethos (trust), Kairos (urgency) in order to collaboratively write a public argument. Procedures: Discuss the 5 basic types of rhetorical strategies as a whole group. Divide class into small groups to read, discuss and categorize sentences into the different rhetorical strategies. Ask students: Why do authors choose a certain strategy and not the other? Which strategy is most effective? Does it depend on when and who is the audience? From *The Norton Reader*, here are some examples.

Pathos Strategy uses emotional language to draw the reader in and make them feel for you. Argument example: “At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist.”<sup>43</sup>

Big Names Strategy uses the names of experts or well-known people who support your position. Argument Example: “Isaac Newton, toward the end of the seventeenth century, showed that a massive body would form a sphere under the pull of gravitational forces (exactly as Aristotle had argued), but only if it were not rotating.”<sup>44</sup>

Logos Strategy uses research studies, data, charts, illustrations, and logic to back up position and points. Argument Example: the essay *Is Coding the New Literacy* by Tasneem Raja, p. 602 uses a chart and map titled “The Pipeline Problem” to show only 20 states count computer science toward graduation requirements in math or science.

Ethos Strategy involves using language that shows that the writer is trustworthy and believable. Argument example: “I sighed a bit, for I knew very few English Lit majors who are equipped to teach me science, but I am very aware of the vast state of my ignorance and I am prepared to learn as much as I can from anyone, so I read on.”<sup>45</sup>

The Kairos Strategy creates a sense of urgency about how this is the right moment to act. Argument example: “When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to advance from that subordination in which they have hitherto remained...”<sup>46</sup>

#### **Activity 2.5: Open Letters and Political Speeches**

Students will be able to read letters and watch speeches to identify the rhetorical strategies in order to write a public argument collaboratively. Procedures: Read Langston Hughes letter-poem “Will V-Day Be Me-Day?” and discuss the purpose of a letter. Point out the basic format of a letter. Divide the class into small groups and assign each group an excerpt from an open letter. Examples from *The Norton Reader: Letter to President Pierce* by Chief Seattle (543-544), and *Letter from Birmingham Jail* by Martin Luther King, Jr. (806-819). Have students read aloud letters and/or listen to notable speeches. Refer to “Teaching Strategies” on Writer Workshop and the Sound of Your Voice. After reading a variety of letters and speeches, have students revise the class essay into letter format. As a whole group, brainstorm a list of possible people for a letter campaign.

Schedule a school-wide public reading, and/or design a public art display. Discuss what further steps would the class want to pursue with their class essay in order to effectively promote appropriate civic actions and social change. Remind students that successful collaborative writing depends highly on group awareness, participation and a clear sense of community identity.

## Annotated Biography

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Anderson, Sarah. "The Power of Personal Narrative." *Teaching Tolerance*. 19 July, 2012. Retrieved 20, June 2019. . Anderson is a middle school interdisciplinary studies teacher in Oregon. She explains how she used personal narrative to empower her students and foster a stronger, closer and more compassionate community of learners.

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Sharp, Coley. *The Creativity Project: An Awesometastic Story Collection*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2018. A collection of writing prompts, art, poetry and stories by 40 diverse and award-winning authors and illustrators in a creative challenge.

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## Reading List About Teaching Writing

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Everson, Barbara. "Vygotsky and the Teaching of Writing." National Writing Project. University of California: Berkeley, California. The Quarterly, Vol. 13, No. 3. 1991. 1 July, 2019. . Everson believes Vygotsky's research on cognition development supports writing instructions that encourage students to have inner dialogues, social interaction and articulation along with the act of writing.

Lowry, Paul Benjamin, Aaron Curtis and Michelle Rene Lowry. *Building a Taxonomy and Nomenclature of Collaborative Writing to*

*Improve Interdisciplinary Research and Practice*, SAGE Publications, 2004. This article discusses the increasing need to build a taxonomy and nomenclature for collaborative writing pointing out issues relating to activities, strategies, control modes, work modes and roles.

Reeves, Judy. *Writing Alone, Writing Together: A Guide for Writers and Writing Groups*. New World Library, 2010. This book gives practical information about how to start a writing group and distinguish the different purposes: workshop, practice, and critique groups.

Speck W. Bruce. *Collaborative Writing: An Annotated Bibliography*. Informational Age Publishing, Incorporated, 2008. This bibliography is divided CW (1970 -1997) into two categories: academic and nonacademic settings. Included 1,000 entries of books and articles covering topics: classroom issues, peer review, technology, ethical and gender concerns as well as corporate acculturation, group dynamics, procedures and policies.

Speedy, Jane. *Collaborative Writing as Inquiry*. University of Bristol, Cambridge Publishing, April 1, 2014. Discuss “collaborative writing as inquiry” as an emergent, vibrant, and under-researched approach that falls between democratic and creative writings.

Yim, Soobin, Mark Warschauer, Binbin Zheng and Joshua Fahey. *Cloud-Based Collaborative Writing and the Common Core Standards*. 2014. This article dissects how K-12 classrooms can use cloud-based writing to meet the Common Core as well as provide students a collaborative space to write and access documents from multiple locations.

## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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Being able to read complex nonfiction text independently is crucial for success in college and at the workplace, this unit addresses English Language Arts Common Core Standards from simple to increasingly more complex to support students in the followings: Reading Informational Text (1.2), Writing (1.4) and, Speaking and Listening (1.5). Reading model essays by well-established writers will challenge and expand students’ concepts as to how to write memoirs and arguments with elements of opinion, information and narration. The unit’s focus on collaborative writing will help students to work together to develop their speaking and listening skills. Teachers can modify these Common Core Standards for 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

RI.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

RI.4.5 Describe the overall structure (e.g., description, chronology, comparison, cause & effect, problem & solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in a text or part of a text.

W.4.1: Write opinion pieces on topics, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

W.4.2: Write informative texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

W.4.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

SL.4.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade level topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Through reading and writing of essays with public points, the following Pennsylvania Standards will be addressed to empower students in the Social Studies domains on Civics and Government (5.1), Rights & Responsibilities of Citizenship (5.2) and, How Government Works (5.3).

5.1.4.C Define the principles and ideals shaping local government by defining terms such as liberty, freedom, democracy, justice and equality.

5.1.4.D Identify key ideas about government found in significant primary documents such as the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution.

5.2.4.A Identify individual rights and needs and the rights and needs of others in the classroom, school, and community.

5.2.4.B Describe the sources of conflict and different ways conflicts can be resolved.

5.2.4.D Describe how citizens participate in school and community activities.

5.3.4.G Identify individual interests and explain ways to influence others.

## Endnotes

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7. Levin, Jeffrey S. and Thomas R. Cole, "Song of Ourselves: A Quantitative History of Autobiographies," in *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 448.
8. Lowry, Paul Benjamin, et al, "Building a Taxonomy and Nomenclature of Collaborative Writing to Improve Interdisciplinary Research and Practice," in *SAGE Publications*, 69.
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