



Introduction

by Jessica Brantley, Associate Professor of English

Following on the model of English 120, a venerable Yale nonfiction course, this seminar was designed to draw connections between reading and writing, between how we analyze a writer’s craft and how we create our own persuasive pieces of prose. The readings assigned in a composition course often give students something to write about, but they rarely serve as a direct model for students’ own writing. For example, students read novels and write expository essays about them. Even when they read nonfiction, they write analyses that take up the same topics or questions without necessarily taking on the same rhetorical strategies. The 2019 Yale National Initiative seminar *Reading for Writing* explored ways of teaching writing through reading models and practicing craft.

Because extensive and thoughtful reading is always the basis for good writing, the seminar read and analyzed a large number of essays to serve as examples of excellence in the writer’s craft. In a range of genres of creative nonfiction, we explored how talented writers shape personal experience to create public argument. Genres included: personal essays, profiles, cultural criticism, political argument, op-eds, humor, and reviews. Writers included: Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, Joan Didion, Frederick Douglass, E. B. White, Jhumpa Lahiri, Annie Dillard, Atul Gawande, Brent Staples, Chang-Rae Lee, David Foster Wallace, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. As we read each essay, we asked ourselves in great detail how its writer had constructed it. Where were the “snaps,” or moments of surprise? How did the essay begin and end? What kinds of local imagery or metaphor expressed the author’s ideas? Most importantly, how did each author communicate the “public point” of a personal narrative?

After practicing this kind of analysis—reading “for craft”—we also explored the value of the workshop environment to crafting good and effective writing. After our introductory session in May, each Fellow wrote a 1500-word essay between May and July according to one of our models. These were personal essays, but each one at moments also tipped more or less towards other genres such as cultural criticism or humor. All of them had a public point that made an individual experience interesting and meaningful to readers who might not ever know the writer personally. Fellows arrived in July ready to circulate first drafts of their essays—not really “drafts,” but best first attempts. We workshoped these first versions together, and, by this important process of reading and discussing our writing, learned to teach each other to become better writers and better teachers of writing. At the same time, Fellows were writing their curriculum units: a very different writing task. These curriculum units were designed to replicate the experience of our seminar in whatever way would be most valuable in the K-12 classroom, whether that meant asking high school students to participate in workshops just like ours, or showing kindergarteners how they can choose adjectives as carefully as the authors of the books they are reading. Final drafts of the Fellows’ own essays, perhaps revised even as they taught their units, were to be shared at the October conference meeting.

The curriculum units that came out of *Reading for Writing: Modeling the Modern Essay* are linked by methodology, even while they vary widely in topic. In each case, teachers seek to show students how asking “how?” rather than “what?” as they read a piece of writing can be valuable both as an interpretative strategy and also as a source of empowerment. Modeling offers young writers strategies for communicating their ideas powerfully and also implicitly invites them, even as they are learning, into a community of professionals.

Akela Leach, for example, reads Trevor Noah’s *Born a Crime* with her class, not only to open their eyes to recent South African history, but to show them how they can admire and replicate Noah’s storytelling skill. Ray Salazar’s main goal for his high school students in Chicago is to show how professional models can help and inspire them as they develop their own writerly voices. Simon Edgett asks his high school students to keep in mind their purpose in writing and the audience they are writing for, analyzing essays according to those two criteria to find models. Sheilvina Knight uses diverse professional stories to inspire her younger students to express their individual identities through their writing. And LaKendra Butler analyzes the perennial favorite *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* in order to show her students how they too can use adjectives in a way that will charm their readers.

Many of the Fellows sought to use their writing units to address the problem of students’ dislike or even fear of writing. Brandon Barr declares “The Death of the Five Paragraph Essay” as he asks his students to write more freeform profiles or personal experiences. Liz Isaac seeks to foster a love of writing in environments where most students’ experience has been discouraging, and Jennifer Frasher encourages good writing by valuing risk above rigor. Lauren Freeman hopes that her students’ learning experiences will transform them from caterpillars into butterflies while Debra Jenkins reassures (and also challenges?) her students, offering the freedom to code-switch knowingly in “You ain’t gotta write like you speak.” Finally, keeping in mind the importance of a “public point” even in a personal essay, Lisa Yau shows her students that even though writing is a personal, individual, enterprise, it also (conversely) comes from and speaks to community.

The seminar community that produced these curriculum units helped all of us involved to become more sensitive readers and more thoughtful writers. I hope that the units themselves help to convey that sense of common writerly purpose to K-12 students all over the country.

Jessica Brantley

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use