

Giving Voice to the Interests and Knowledge of Students - Mixing Narrative and Informational Writing

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Overview

This curriculum seeks to help students learn similarities and difference across major genres of nonfiction. Specifically, activities are suggested that encourage young writers to mesh and mix narrative and informational writing. Blurring the boundaries of genre classifications at this very basic level is a first step to maximizing the use of genre as a pedagogical tool. The curriculum acknowledges that genre classification can be useful in the teaching of writing, but also recognizes the importance for both teachers and students to understand that there are many ways to classify genres and that these classifications serve a variety purposes.

In addition to blurring the boundaries of genre classification, several other fundamental beliefs about teaching writing establish a foundation for this curriculum. The first is that if students are to produce high quality writing they must feel ownership of that work. This concept of ownership is tightly linked with the notion of empowerment through writing. When students are empowered through writing, the desire to make themselves understood takes on a new urgency. A second fundamental underpinning is the notion of audience, or writing for the reader. Although the concept of audience may have been suggested to students, rarely have they been asked to keep the reader foremost in their mind as they write.

The curriculum unit was created for gifted seventh and eighth graders, but the ideas presented are adaptable to grades four through twelve and for any level of student.

Rationale

In the following pages I will discuss the use of genre in the teaching of writing, first outlining various ways of categorizing genre, then examining both the strengths and drawbacks of using genre as a basis for teaching writing. I will attempt to convince the reader that blurring the boundaries between genre classifications can help to create strong writers. I will then present defenses for other pedagogical strategies at work in the curriculum. These include allowing student choice of topics in the writing classroom and encouraging young writers to build experiences for the reader.

Understanding the Benefits and Limits of Genre Based Writing Instruction

The need to classify and categorize is strong among teachers of writing and testers of writing. Using genre classification as a structure for teaching writing is widely practiced at all levels, from primary through university. The benefits are strong, but has the interpretation of this practice by educational bureaucracies been too strictly enforced? Does a strict division of genre, which has been further confined by standards, portfolio requirements, and state writing assessments, restrain the development of good writing more than enhance it? This curriculum unit combines two of the most basic and common genre classifications, narrative and informational writing, as a first step in encouraging teachers and students to understand that genre classification is not law and that the very best writers in all genres combine the "criteria" of many genres.

To aid in an understanding of how genre classification can both help and hinder the teaching of writing let us first look at four different groupings of genre. I will then make an attempt to understand why these categories exist and what purposes they serve for educators. Thirdly, I will examine how overly rigid classification can inhibit the development of student writers.

Examining Four Nonfiction Genre Classifications

The most basic genre classification that guides teachers in Pittsburgh is the PSSA, or Pennsylvania System of School Assessment's classification. This very large testing machine, which is a part of the State Department of Education, keeps things simple with three nonfiction genres: informational writing, narrative writing, and persuasive writing. In a handbook designed to help school districts and classroom teachers prepare children for these writing assessments given in grades 6, 9 and 11, the three genres are defined. The Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Advisory Committee chose the three classifications and offer explanations of them and reasons why they should be assessed. The handbook states that informational writing "is used as a common writing strategy in academic, personal and job-related areas; as a tool that spans a range of thinking skills from recall to analysis and evaluation; and as a means of presenting

information in prose." Narrative writing "relates a series of events of an actual occurrence or a proposed occurrence at a particular time and in a particular place. It requires writers to closely observe, explore and reflect upon a wide range of experiences." Persuasive writing is assessed "for three reasons: 1) it requires thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation; 2) it requires writers to choose from a variety of situations and to take a stand, and 3) it is a skill frequently used in school and the workplace."

The Pittsburgh Public Schools use a similar genre classification for their standards-based portfolio requirements. For the writing exhibit at the middle school level the genre classifications are a narrative account, a report, a problem solution or persuasive essay, and a narrative "how-to" paper. There are other genre pieces that need to be included in the portfolio that come under the heading of "reading exhibit". These are a response to literature and a response to informational materials. Finally, the portfolio requires a reflective essay that asks the writer to comment on the portfolio entries. This classification is very similar to the PSSA's. The report aligns with informational writing and the narrative "how-to" paper is an addition to the PSSA grouping. When the criteria lists and rubrics for these genre classifications are examined, it is clear that the designers of these classifications sensed, either consciously or subconsciously, that there might be overlap among genre classifications. For instance, the criteria list for a "how-to" paper encourages students to "create a context." An explanation for creating a context is "the writer tells... his/her relation to or interest in the subject matter". Students are also encouraged to use "devices such as opening with dialogue" to engage the readers. Certainly these criteria demand a use of skills from the narrative genre.

A text created for university students titled *Principles of Writing as Representational Composition*, written by David S. Kaufer and Brian S. Butler, of Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh, presents a genre approach that renames and expands the classifications of the PSSA and the PPS. This approach also acknowledges the "crossover" of criteria between and among genre classifications. The major categories presented by Kaufer and Butler are portraiture, landscapes, and invitations for interaction. Within the third category reside three sub-categories: invitations to learn, invitations to do and learn, and invitations to decide. The authors purposely teach portraiture and landscapes first because these two genres can be integral parts of writing produced in the invitations categories. For instance, when writing an invitation to decide paper (which is, of course, a persuasion piece), the author may need to present herself as a worthy expert and therefore use skills from the portraiture genre. Likewise, the writer of argument or persuasion most likely will have to inform the reader so that he can be persuaded to make the desired decision.

Another well-respected classification of nonfiction genres appears regularly in university writing programs and is explained clearly in Bill Roorbach's book *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction, The Art of Truth*. In this expansive anthology, Roorbach uses the classifications of literary diaries and journals, literary memoir, the personal essay, literary journalism, and in a fourth category called creative nonfiction classified by subject, he includes nature writing, literary travel, the science essay, and creative cultural criticism. These Creative Nonfiction categories do not align directly with the classifications of genre presented earlier, but many points of alignment exist. Literary memoir and literary travel fit into the broad narrative genre. The personal essay most closely aligns with the writing proposed by this curriculum, combining the narrative and informational genres. The genre classifications under the heading of Creative Nonfiction can serve to broaden the whole idea of genre classification for teachers.

Why Genre?

Before analyzing where the genre classifications intersect and overlap, and before attempting to understand how genre classifications can limit and stultify writing in grades K-12, it is important to understand why educators are so dependent on the genre classifications.

The educators who are members of the Pennsylvania Assessment Advisory Committee and the creators of the Pittsburgh Public Schools Portfolio requirements were faced with a challenge. They knew they must prepare students for writing challenges that will be encountered in work situations and are under heavy pressure from the business community to turn out literate graduates who can communicate in written form. The basic genre classifications decided upon by these groups reflects a sense of what types of writing might be required in the "real world". Also, the PAAC needed to limit the writing to be tested because of the realities of testing and scoring situations.

In academic circles, there actually has been quite a bit of research and writing done to justify the use of genre classifications in writing instruction. In the introduction to his book *Genre and the Language Learning Classroom*, Brian Paltridge outlines some of the arguments that have been put forth in support of genre as an organizing principle in writing instruction. Curriculum designers and subsequently test designers look to genre classification because it groups texts that are similar in terms of purpose, organization, and audience. As an organizing framework it goes beyond grammatical or functional units yet excludes neither from the classroom situation. It allows students to think of purpose and audience

and still includes aspects such as grammar, functions, vocabulary and language skills.

Kaufer and Butler view the teaching of writing through genre as an "advanced writing instruction". They state that elementary writing instruction begins with a structural approach, combining words to create clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. Writing from genre "begins with the notion that words and sentences address external situations and audience to which the writer must respond". (Kaufer and Butler, 2000)

Bill Roorbach not only defines a contemporary genre, Creative Nonfiction, but breaks it down even further. These classifications within the creative nonfiction genre, which Roorbach admits are argued about among his colleagues, must serve to organize courses and assignments in University MFA programs and in anthologies like the one he produced. Although there is a traceable history to these genres, the categories within Creative Nonfiction attempt to classify writing that is being produced outside of the classroom by contemporary writers.

Problems with Strict Genre Classifications

A colleague of mine, who has taught middle school aged children for many years, commented that before she had to confine her students' writing to meet the strict genre guidelines created by the PPS and PSSA, the writing of her students was lively and exciting. Now she finds it dull and boring. This observation reflects a concern that even the most ardent supporters of teaching through genre warn about.

Kaufer and Butler warn that, "Writing from genre cannot succeed as a mature form if it is strictly formulaic. No two writing situations, no matter how similar, are exactly identical. The situation the writer finds herself in always departs, in small ways or large, from the situations she was trained to write for. The writer of genre must bring to every writing project a way of flexibly representing situations and audience..." (Kaufer and Butler, 2000.) Throughout their book, *Principles of Writing as Representational Composition*, which does use a genre classification structure, they continuously show students how blurring the boundaries of genre will often be necessary. The writer of argument uses self portraiture to build a case for herself as an expert or observer portraiture to present a sympathetic character who can illustrate a particular point the writer needs to make.

Paltridge quotes from several sources to make the same point. "Genre analysis should, however, remain descriptive and not prescriptive, as it sometimes has become." "It is also important for teachers to recognize that they are teaching tendencies rather than fixed patterns of forms. Equally, teachers need to guard against leading students to the view that genres have tightly prescribed boundaries and that a text must be a member of either one genre category or another." "The aim should not be to give students rigid templates against which all texts are then forced to fit." "The picture might, however, be more complex than has previously been thought. Douglas Biber, for example, in his corpus-based study, found a wide range of linguistic variation within the particular genres examined, some of which he describes as surprising and contrary to popular expectation." (Paltridge)

Another important researcher in the field of writing, George Hillocks, Jr., recently studied the effects of the writing assessments used in the states of Illinois and Kentucky on classroom practices. Illinois assesses writing in three genres; persuasive, expository, and narrative. The Kentucky assessment is based on a far more complex theory of writing. It allows for many kinds of writing, providing a far richer basis for a curriculum that includes all kinds of imaginative writing, several kinds, of personal writing, and many kinds of transactional writing. As a result of this oversimplified classification system which was further restricted by writing consultants who stressed the "five paragraph theme", Hicks found that this formula had become the central staple of the writing program. Hicks states that "the five paragraph formula provides a way to organize the blather, but it ignores thoughtful development. It focuses attention on three 'reasons' supposedly in support of a main idea, not on whether the three points actually support that idea, or whether the three points themselves require support, or whether the three points make sense... Further, when students have been subjected to this instruction for eight to ten years, they come to see the five paragraph themes and the shoddy thinking that goes with it as the solution to any writing problem." (Hicks, 2003)

Finally, when teaching strict genre classification to students, the thoughtful teacher of writing must ask herself, do writers in the real world bother to define their genres before they sit down to write? Surely, these writers think first about their audience and the kind of experience they are trying to create for their readers. Information they know about genre classification and criteria required for specific genre may rest in their subconscious, but certainly it is not the outline used to plan a magazine article, instruction manual, academic piece, etc.

Student Choice of Topics

I don't believe that all classroom writing topics should be chosen by students, but definitely there is a place for student choice in classrooms of adolescent writers. In an article titled "A Framework for Choosing Topics, for, with and by Adolescent Writers," published in *Voices from the Middle*, Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Mahar outline the benefits of both teacher choice of topics and student choice of topics. They believe that there is a need for both in classrooms.

Teachers must sometimes choose topics for several reasons. They sometimes need to promote engagement with issues that students might not choose on their own. Teacher chosen topics can offer classes multiple perspectives on the same topic or issue. Requiring students to practice genres that would have a direct impact on their status in communities beyond the classroom provides a third reason for teacher choice in topics. Chandler-Olcott and Mahar have found in their research that teacher selection of topics is by far the most common approach in schools. They encourage a mix of student and teacher selection.

In favor of student selected topics they point out that students need to have opportunities to choose topics because it helps them identify and develop preferences as writers. They claim that self-selection creates more interest in and motivation for writing and creates room in classroom communities for individuals' passions and interests. Finally, they feel that the practice promotes learners' use of writing as a powerful and practical tool. (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar, 2001)

Building an Experience For the Reader

Building an experience for the reader is more than just giving a fleeting thought to "audience". Dr. Kaufer, in his seminar titled Nonfiction Genres, helped teachers understand that keeping the reader in mind should be a primary task for all writers, especially writers of nonfiction. For Dr. Kaufer, the reader is even the basis of evaluation. There are three major ways of evaluating texts in writing education; expert review, which is the norm for creative writing; text-based criteria, which includes rubrics; and reader-based criteria. For many middle school students, the whole notion of even caring about the reader is new. For most of their school careers they have written only for the teacher. Often this writing, especially nonfiction writing, has only been to prove to the teacher that they have knowledge.

Objectives

There are 13 primary objectives of this unit, each of them already referred to in the Overview and Rationale sections. The objectives can be organized into three categories: objectives relating to genre classification, objectives relating to writing skills and objectives relating to writing process.

Students will demonstrate an understanding of the history and practice of genre classification. Students will read various published works and categorize them in a variety of genre classifications. Students will write at least three essays which mix narrative and informational writing.

Several skill based issues are addressed in this curriculum unit. Students will practice and demonstrate improvement in the areas of: organization, creating and staying within a narrow focus, creating strong transitions between paragraphs and between personal narrative sections and informational sections, writing in the active voice, and using active and vivid verbs.

The third category of objectives relate to the writing process. Students will assess their own interests and knowledge and choose topics they have strong personal connections to. Students will define their audiences and think about the experiences they are creating for readers. Students will use feedback from peers and teacher to revise their work. Students will read the work of peers and participate in classroom sessions that train them in revision techniques. Students will publish their work in class anthologies, hall and room displays and national magazines.

As stated in the final appendix, this curriculum relates to five Communication standards from the Pittsburgh Public Schools Content Standards.

Strategies

The strategies presented in this section have been developed and refined in my own classroom at the Pittsburgh Gifted Center where I teach seventh and eighth grade. I am in a unique situation of providing enrichment to almost 300 students a week. My students have all been labeled gifted, but their writing abilities span a wide spectrum. Some are highly capable writers and exhibit great linguistic variation, but others have had very little experience in writing and score below basic on the state assessments. Therefore, the ideas presented here will be useful for teachers of writing at all upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels.

Introducing Students to Four Genre Classifications

To help students understand the similarities and differences in genre classification they can examine for themselves a variety of classifications and attempt to categorize writings. In the appendix I have provided a list of four different genre classifications. (Appendix 3) You can challenge students to identify similarities in each group. Then specific readings can be given to students. They should be directed to read, keeping in mind the genre classifications. Finally, hold a discussion attempting to place each reading in one or more genre classifications.

Helping Students Identify Interests and Knowledge - Empowerment Through Writing

Empowerment and ownership seem to me to be two very interconnected notions in writing. Both of them are rooted in the theory that if students write about what they really care about, or see a significant purpose for writing, they will feel empowered by the act and therefore more connected to it. Ownership refers to the student's sense that a piece of writing is really his - from his mind, heart, and soul. Empowerment refers to the idea that through writing, a human can exert power over a reader.

Middle School students have many interests and many areas of expertise, but they rarely consider them suitable topics for "school" writing. This point became apparent recently in my classroom. I had already spent several class sessions making a clear and strong point (at least I thought I had) that I wanted the students to choose topics in which they had a strong personal interest. One morning I noticed Cindy literally banging away at a computer in the corner of the classroom. She seemed agitated and was attacking the computer keys as she wrote. When I asked her what she was writing about she blurted out, "Oh, its not anything I could write about for this class, I have too many really strong opinions about it!" I was flabbergasted and sputtered, "But, Cindy, that's the whole point; I want you to write about topics you have strong opinions about!" She then proceeded to write an impassioned essay about girls' body images and the effects the media has on creating negative self-images in women.

Clinton's story provides a second illustration of how true ownership of writing can invigorate young writers. I had taught Clinton for an entire semester and he was an extremely reluctant writer. No prompts from me ever turned him on and he laboriously slogged through every assignment, taking as much as 30 minutes to write a single paragraph. When I introduced the idea of writing an essay concerning something he really cared about and to combine personal experience with factual information, Clinton took off. He wrote for 45 minutes straight, never stopping, about his passion - Hip-Hop music. He was extremely

knowledgeable about all aspects of the musical genre and had fascinating stories to share about the recordings he and his cousins make in the family's garage.

To begin to make it clear to students that they will be able to choose topics to write about, I provided an "interest survey" at the beginning of the semester. (Appendix 1) The survey contained questions like: What parts of popular culture such as movies, music, or video games do you love? What behaviors do you observe in others that you respect, despise, or wonder about? Is there a place that you love? When you watch the television news or look at the newspaper, what stories draw your interest? What special knowledge do members of your family have? What individuals do you admire? What dreams or fantasies do you have for a career? What theories have you developed about school, teaching, and learning? Have you or people close to you had a disease that you are curious about?

This identification of interests and knowledge grew during the semester. I collected and posted interesting newspaper and magazine articles that I thought might turn on students. Students continued to read each other's work and get ideas from one another, and because they were now concerned about writing for their readers, they were attuned to seeking out topics across the range of their experiences. We posted their essays in the hall under headings like, "What are We Passionate About?", "What Do We Care About?", "Who Do We Admire?", and "What Do We Worry About?" My students wrote about topics as varied as "Integrity in Teenagers," "Why Pittsburgh Doesn't Have a Professional Basketball Team," "Teenage Depression," and "Call Me a New Age Hippie." (Appendix 7)

Building an Experience For the Reader

As mentioned in the Rationale section of this curriculum, a major goal of this curriculum is to encourage students to begin to think about the experience being created for the reader.

Dr. Kaufer is very clear in differentiating between the intentions and purposes of the writing and the effects the writing has on a reader. However, to move middle school students to this level, it seems appropriate to begin with simpler concepts like audience and intentions and purposes. Getting students to think in terms of building experiences for readers may take quite a bit of effort, but they will ultimately feel better about their writing and most likely produce better writing. I started out the unit by simply putting the word "audience" on the planning sheet students used for their first essay. (Appendix 2) For many students, this was their first encounter with the concept of writing a paper "for" someone. The curriculum guide "Tool Kit" produced by the Literacy Plus staff in the Pittsburgh Public Schools acknowledges the importance of the reader when it

asks students to "create a context" and identify the writer's purpose. Damien knew that he wanted to write something about video games, his passion. He seemed puzzled at first by the question of audience, but very quickly lit up and excitedly asked, "You mean I could write this for my dad? He's always asking me what game he should play!" What a stimulus for Damien, he was empowered to create an experience for his father.

As my students' experience with nonfiction writing grew, we talked more about this idea and tried to move in the direction of Dr. Kaufer's theories. For the second essay my students would write, I printed the following question on small strips of day-glo paper: "What experience are you trying to create for the reader?" In discussion, students first offered answers like, "to inform them," and "to teach them". When I pushed and asked for more, they were able to define deeper and more meaningful goals. Therezia, whose brother had just finished basic training for the Marines, was able to state, "I want the reader to understand how hard basic training is and how we should respect these young people for going through it." I asked her if she wanted the reader to also empathize with young Marines and she nodded her head.

Other questions and statements that Dr. Kaufer provided can help to stimulate more discussion and more thought on the part of student writers. He made very clear the difference between intentions and purposes of the writer and effects on the reader. The term effects refers to the experience the author actually provides the reader. It refers to human, meaningful interactions with the text. This subtle distinction can be grasped by middle school students.

Dr. Kaufer also encourages writers to "build a contract with the reader" and to think of language as it projects outward. He asks writers, "Where are your readers before they read your text? Where do you want them to be after they read your text?" Another way to approach the issue is to ask young writers to state, "Here's what I'm trying to do for my reader (the ride I'm trying to take my reader on)". "Here's what I'm doing in language to get there." For the third essay written by my students, I provided a planning guide that included these questions. (Appendix 4) As students progress in the writing of nonfiction, they can move from a simple understanding of audience to these more complex ways of considering what it means to write for a reader. The teacher can include more complex questions in her discussions with students, on the planning sheets she offers students, and on the peer response forms she provides.

Encouraging Revision

There are two major categories of revision addressed in this nonfiction unit. The first deals with the effect the writing has on the reader, as described above, and the second category deals more with technical or craft aspects of writing.

Revision that deals with the effect of writing on the reader requires writing to be shared with as many readers as possible. In Dr. Kaufer's undergraduate classes at Carnegie Mellon University, students work in an environment which makes this process very easy. First, all student work from a class is available on-line so that each student can read anyone else's work at any time. These writings are processed through Dr. Kaufer's Docuscope software, a sophisticated program that color codes strings of text. Also in his classes student essays are projected on a large screen so that writing can be examined and discussed in class sessions.

These experiences are a bit more difficult to organize in a public school, but certainly efforts can be made to do so. Many schools have Smart Boards which can be hooked up to a computer so that an individual student's work can be examined by a class. Some schools are lucky enough to have servers which all computers are connected to. In these situations the work of a single student can be looked at simultaneously at individual computer screens in a classroom setting. These sessions are extremely helpful, but in a class of 30 students it can't be the only method for obtaining reader feedback. There simply isn't enough time to give attention to each child's work.

Other methods include requiring students to complete written peer responses. For every essay written by a student, she must read and respond in writing to the essay of another. I randomly assign these essays, and usually students read a piece by an unknown student. Teachers can organize oral peer response groups as well, but I prefer the individual, written form of peer response. Students tend to be more serious with their responses and the inclination to respond with, "It was great," is lessened.

I provided other opportunities for readership of my students' nonfiction pieces. In one corner of the room I placed 10 boxes to hold varying categories of student work. These categories included music, sports, people we admire, human behavior, political issues, etc. I encouraged students to read an essay whenever they had an extra 10 minutes. Here I provided a shortened feedback form with the questions, "What did you like about my essay?" and "What effect did my essay have on you?" (Appendix 6)

Also, I put essays in the hall to encourage peer reading. When students read the essays in the hall, they didn't necessarily respond to the author, but I think their reading of other essays helped them identify the strengths and

weaknesses of their own work. They were able to analyze the effect the essay had on themselves and translate that to thinking about their own work.

So, there are many methods available to provide opportunities for reading, responding to, and analyzing student work. But how will the teacher initiate the discussion and prod the students toward responses that help the writer determine the effect her work has had on the reader? Certainly this is a skill that will develop over the time period that the teacher works with a particular group of students and will take quite a bit of talk and guidance from the teacher.

The following interaction took place early in the semester in my classroom. Tawanda was reading an essay written by Derek. Derek is from Puerto Rico and felt very strongly about the US Navy base on Vieques. In conversations with him I knew that he was passionate about this issue and that members of his family had been involved in trying to force the closure of this base. Derek did not convey this passion in his draft. After reading the essay Tawanda complained, "This is so boring. But I would be bored by this topic no matter how it was written!" I told her not necessarily. It was Derek's responsibility as a writer to make her care. We then got into a discussion of how he might have done that, possibly by including stories of individuals who's lives have been affected by this base. As the discussion progressed Tawanda thoughtfully noted, "My essay is boring too!" I think this type of discussion, over a period of time, can begin to change the way students think about their writing, to begin to think about the experience being created by the reader. As Dr. Kaufer tells his students, "Readers should be able to thank you after reading your work, because they had such an enjoyable or enlightening experience."

Revision for Craft and Technique

Three major revision needs predominated in the essays written by my students: focus, transitions, and using active voice and vivid verbs.

The term focus finds its way onto all of the rubrics promoted by the Literacy Plus program of the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Although the planning sheet I offered students required them to define a narrow focus for each essay, thinking in terms of a narrow focus and then staying within the bounds of the focus proved to be a huge problem for many of them. Also, I required a minimum length of two pages, single space, twelve font for each essay. This minimum length was intended to force the students to elaborate and expand their thinking and writing. It served this purpose, but also encouraged students to ramble, simply to fill in space. The act of rambling can be very productive for middle school aged writers in early drafts of papers because it encourages fluency and often allows the young writer to brainstorm as she writes. However, my students

often did not reread their own work after these rambling early drafts and so did not detect when the rambling caused them to stray from their narrow focus. How can we encourage revision of this sort?

First, the teacher must insist that each writer reread his own work, looking specifically for places where he breaks away from his focus. Second, questions aimed at identifying focus should be clearly stated on any peer response form. For instance, What is this essay about, can I sum it up in 25 words or less? Are all secondary and subordinate points tied to the original idea, focus, theory or argument? Students often find it easier to identify this lack of focus in the writing of peers than in their own work. The more essays read by a student, the more easily she will be able to look at her own work in terms of focus. The issue of focus can also be easily addressed in a class mini lesson where student work is displayed via a smart board or overhead projector. A class can work together to identify where a writer strays from her focus and how that can be rectified.

The use of effective transitions is a more difficult area of revision to deal with. A reader can easily identify a place in an essay where a transition is needed, but creating the best transition is another matter. Transitions proved to be a serious problem in my assignments especially because I asked the students to combine personal experiences with informational research. The first step in encouraging revision of this type is to call the writer's attention to it. A class lesson can be created with examples from student essays. The teacher can compile a collection of transitions that work well and a second set of places in essays where a more effective transition is needed. These can provide the basis for an effective class lesson. Also, specific questions can be included on peer response forms that ask readers to identify "Where do transitions need to be added or improved? In other words, where does the essay fail to flow?"

Although not often taught in middle school or high school, the difference between active and passive voice is not really a difficult concept and can easily be grasped by adolescent writers. Arthur Whimbey and Myra Linden, in their book *Teaching and Learning Grammar: The Prototype-Construction Approach*, make this writing issue easily accessible to students. They point out that active sentences are often more efficient and can make points more strongly and succinctly than passive sentences. In addition, the verbs used in active sentences tend to be more vivid. This notion of vivid verbs is also highlighted by Jane Bell Kiester in her book *Blowing Away the State Writing Assessments*. Kiester declares that the use of active verbs can increase a student's score on these assessment by at least two points. She encourages teachers to have a "funeral" for all to be verbs. Whimby and Linden state that, "inexperienced writers sometimes write passive sentences unconsciously or unintentionally. They do not realize that

they could express the same idea more effectively with an active sentence."
(Appendix 9)

To give students practice in changing passive sentences to active ones, the teacher can compile a list of passive sentences taken directly from the student essays written in her class. Students can work individually, in small groups, or as a whole class to turn these passive sentences into active ones. Students can also be directed to go through their own drafts, marking passive sentences with one color of marker and active sentences with another.

Classroom Activites

This section will provide daily activities for a 15 day unit. Most of the activities have already been explained in the Strategies section of the unit. Many of the activities refer to handouts that are provided in the Appendix.

Day 1

Begin to talk with students about genre. Ask them to share their own experiences with the term. Provide a handout or post on an overhead or on a large poster the four classifications of genre discussed in the rationale of this curriculum unit. (Appendix 3) These classifications are the PSSA classifications, the PPS portfolio classifications, the groupings defined by Kaufer and Butler and the Creative Nonfiction categories used by Roorbach.

Explain to students that some genre classifications come from use in the "real world" and possess a history. Other genre classifications are made for pedagogical reasons, or simply for the teaching and testing of writing.

Provide nonfiction pieces for students to read. Depending on the class situation these can be assigned to small groups, to individuals, or to the entire class. The selections can come from a wide variety of sources including school literature anthologies, newspaper and magazine clippings or collections of writings listed in the bibliography of this unit. After reading, challenge students to decide which genre classifications particular pieces belong in. Point out the "crossover" nature of many of the pieces.

Day 2

Pass out the interest and knowledge survey to students. (Appendix 1) Challenge them to complete the survey and pick a topic for their first essay. After students

have chosen their first topic, encourage them to complete the planning sheet. (Appendix 2)

Day 3, 4, 5

Distribute a criteria list to students. (Appendix 3) Encourage them to begin internet research or begin writing the essay. During class writing time the teacher can offer mini lessons in the following areas as needed:

- use student models to illustrate a wide range of effective beginnings (Appendix 11)
- finding effective ways to tie in student experiences with research
- transitions between paragraphs
- using active voice (Appendix 9)
- eliminating "to be" verbs and using vivid verbs (Appendix 10)
- staying focused

As students work on drafts, the teacher should offer feedback when a student asks for it.

Day 6

As students finish drafts, they must complete a written peer response for another student's work. (Appendix 5) If time permits, the entire class should work through one of these peer response forms together, so that the teacher can model the most helpful kinds of answers.

In addition to this "formal" peer response, I created a table where students could leave an extra copy of their drafts to get even more peer feedback. When students had extra time they were encouraged to read essays from this table. A form was provided for this shorter feedback. (Appendix 6). Because so many students left essays on this table for peer feedback, I labeled ten boxes with subjects labeled such as music, sports, diseases, careers, human behavior, etc.

Day 7

Individual students should be getting feedback from peers at this point. Each student will have a "formal" peer response and possibly several short responses. Students should now begin to revise their drafts. Again, if time permits, the entire class should work together on a sample draft and accompanying peer response. Most students need quite a bit of training to provide a helpful response and then to make use of a peer response.

When time permits, the more drafts that can be read in a large group session the better. Teachers may want to facilitate small response groups.

Day 8, 9, 10

After all students have read several essays, teachers might want to work with the class to develop a new criteria list. Students themselves may have strong ideas about essays that provided pleasurable experiences for them.

As students begin to choose topics for their second essays, the teacher must further the discussion of audience and writing for the reader. I passed out day-glow papers with the question, "What experience do you want to create for your reader?" Students needed to answer this question in writing as they planned for their second essay. In addition, the answers to this question were shared in a large class discussion.

Basically the same process should be followed for the second essay as was followed by the first. During the writing of this second essay the teacher now has many student models to use in mini-lessons that illustrate strong and weak skills.

Days 11, 12, 13

The same basic process can be used for the third essay. Students research and write; get feedback from the teacher; provide and receive peer feedback, revise, and finalize. Some students had difficulty coming up with a topic for this third essay. Many had written about their true passions for the first two essays, and some were seeking more unique topics, not wanting to write about the same topics their peers had already covered. If this happens, the teacher may need to conduct more individual conferences. I referred students to a huge reference file I had created with articles from magazines, newspaper, and the internet. I also distributed a list of topics suggested by peers. (Appendix 7)

For the third essay, I created a different planning guide. This one is based totally on creating an experience for the reader. (Appendix 4) Because the students had been readers of several essays written by their peers, the entire idea of writing for the reader was beginning to make sense to them.

Days 14 & 15.

These final days should be devoted to publishing. If at all possible teachers and students should work together to create class anthologies. If digital cameras are available, photographs of student writers can be included with each essay.

Also during this time students should be encouraged to find larger audiences for their work. A list of national magazines that publish student work is included in the Appendix. (APPENDIX 8) Other possibilities include school newspapers, internet pals from other schools, and local city or suburban newspapers

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A definitive work on writing workshops in Middle School classrooms, this book really should be read by all middle school teachers.

Bender, Sheila. *Writing Personal Essays: How to Shape Your Life Experiences for the Page*. Writers Digest Books, 2002. ISBN: 1582971781

Chandler-Olcott, Kelly and Donna Mahar. "A Framework for Choosing Topics for, with, and by Adolescent Writers," *Voices From the Middle*. NCTE, September, 2001.

The authors argue for student choice in topic selections.

Graves, Donald. *Investigate Nonfiction*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1989. ISBN: 0-435-08486-0.

Appropriate for upper elementary and middle school teachers, Graves offers advice for integrating nonfiction into writing workshop classrooms.

Gutkind, Lee. *The Art of Creative Nonfiction*. John Wiley & Sons, 1997. ISBN: 0471113565.

Gutkind, Lee, ed. *Lessons in Persuasion, Creative Nonfiction/Pittsburgh Connections*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.

This issue of the journal *Creative Nonfiction* is filled with nonfiction work that is connected to Pittsburgh. Not all of the essays are appropriate for school students, but there are many that are.

Hillock, George. "Fighting Back: Assessing the Assessments," *English Journal*, March, 2003.

George Hillock studied the writing assessments of five states and analyzed the stultifying effect that teaching to these assessments had on the writing of students. This article is a plea to teachers of writing to go beyond the assessments and to not allow student writing to be stifled by these exams.

Kaufers, David, and Brian Butler. *Designing Interactive Worlds With Words: Principles of Writing as Representational Composition*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates, 2000. ISBN: 0-8058-3424-9

The authors created this text for non-writing majors at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh. Middle School and High School

teachers will find that most of the material presented is useful for their teaching situation also.

Kiester, Jane Bell. *Blowing Away the State Writing Assessments*. Maupin House, 2000. ISBN: 0-929895-36-3

Any teacher concerned with helping students prepare for writing assessments should read this book.

Lane, Barry. *After the End: Teaching and Learning Creative Revision*.

Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1993. ISBN: 0-435-08714-2.

A classic for all teachers of elementary through high school, the chapters in this book cover poetry and fiction as well as nonfiction genres.

Lopate, Phillip. *The Art of the Personal Essay*. New York: Random House, 1995. ISBN: 0-385-42339-x

Four hundred years of essays are included in this collection. The contents is organized first by history and geography and then a second time by form and theme.

McEwen, Christian and Mark Statman, ed. *The Alphabet of the Trees: A Guide to Nature Writing*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2000. ISBN: 0-915924-63-3

This book is a collection of "how-to" articles written by teachers. Many chapters are devoted to poetry, but at some are directed to nonfiction writing and include topics like "The Naming of Things: Being Specific in Nature Writing," and "A Matter of Scale, Searching for Wildness in the City."

Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. *Writing Assessment Handbook*.

http://www.pde.state.pa.us/a_and_t/cwp/view.asp?a=108&Q=73153

This comprehensive handbooks explains the PA state assessments in writing and give hints for preparing for the examinations.

Portalupi, Joann, and Ralph Fletcher. *Nonfiction: Craft Lessons, Teaching Information Writing K-8*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2001.

Romano, Tom. *Clearing the Way: Working With Teenage Writers*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educationl Books, 1987. ISBN: 0-435-08439-9

Roorbach, Bill, ed. *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: the Art of Truth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. ISBN: 0-19-513556-3

This wonderful collection of essays provides outstanding examples and models for teachers to use with their students. The selections are classified into sections

titled "Literary Diaries and Journals," "Literary Memoir," "The Personal Essay," "Literary Journalism," and "Creative Nonfiction Classified by Subject." Bill Roorbach does an excellent job of outlining the short history of the term creative nonfiction as well as explaining each subcategory of the genre.

Stout, Glen, ed. *The Best American Sports Writing 2002*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002. ISBN: 061808685.

Whimbey, Arthur and Myra J. Linden. *Teaching and Learning Grammar: The Prototype-Construction Approach*. BGF Performance Systems, LLC: Chicago, 2001. ISBN: 0-9709075.

Chapter 15 in this book offers a very simple and clear explanation of passive and active voice.

Worsley, Dale and Bernadette Mayer. *The Art of Science Writing*. Teachers and Writers Collaborative: New York, 1989. ISBN: 0-915924-20-X

A very concrete method of encouraging students to write essays about scientific issues is presented in this book for teachers.

Willis, Meredith Sue. *Deep Revision: A Guide for Teachers, Students, and Other Writers*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1993. ISBN: 0-915924-41-

APPENDIX 1

PERSONAL INTEREST AND KNOWLEDGE SURVEY

NAME _____ **PERIOD** _____

1. When you watch the television news or look at the newspaper, what stories draw your interest? What do you pay attention to?
2. What popular culture do you love? Movies? Music? Television? Video Games?
3. What special knowledge do members of your family have? Does your grandfather have a collection of war memorabilia? Is your mother a poet or scientist? Are any interests of your family members your interests also?
4. Is there a place that you love? This can be a place you've been to or fantasize about going to. This can be a local destination like Kennywood, or a foreign country like Thailand.
5. What behaviors do you observe in others that you respect? despise? wonder about? What questions do you have about how people act and why?
6. What individuals (living or dead) do you admire?
7. What dreams or fantasies do you have for a career?
8. You have been in school for at least 7 years. What theories have you developed about good teaching, how you learn best, or the importance or non-importance of particular activities that go on in school?
9. Have you or people close to you had a disease that you are especially interested in?
10. List five other topics that you have an interest in.

APPENDIX 2

**PLANNING GUIDE - NONFICTION
COMBINING NARRATIVE & INFORMATIONAL WRITING**

Name _____ **Period** _____

1. General topic:

2. Questions you would like to answer:

3. Theories you would like to prove or explore:

4. Why are you interested in this topic?

5. Experiences you have had relating to this topic.

6. Knowledge you possess:

7. Possible sources for information:

APPENDIX 3

GENRE CLASSIFICATIONS

PA STATE ASSESSMENTS	PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS	KAUFER & BUTLER'S REPRESENTATIONAL	CREATIVE NONFICTION as presented by Roorbach
1. NARRATIVE WRITING	1. NARRATIVE ACCOUNT	1. PORTRAITURE	1. LITERARY DIARIES & JOURNALS
2. INFORMATIONAL WRITING	2. A REPORT	2. LANDSCAPES	2. LITERARY MEMOIR
3. PERSUASIVE WRITING	3. PROBLEM-SOLUTION <i>or</i> PERSUASIVE ESSAY	3. INVITATIONS FOR INTERACTION - invitations to learn - invitations to do and learn - invitations to decide	3. PERSONAL ESSAY
	4. NARRATIVE "HOW-TO" PAPER		4. LITERARY JOURNALISM
			5. NATURE WRITING
			6. LITERARY TRAVEL
			7. THE SCIENCE ESSAY
			8. CREATIVE CULTURAL CRITICISM

APPENDIX 5

**PEER RESPONSE - NON FICTION - COMBINING INFORMATIONAL AND
NARRATIVE WRITING**

Essay author _____ **Responder** _____

1. What is this essay about? Can I sum it up in 25 words or less?

2. What is the strongest part of the essay?

3. Was enough detail given in the personal story or vignette section of the essay? Where can more detail be added?

4. Does the first paragraph lead into the essay or does it promise one thing and the rest of the essay delivers something different?

5. Is the piece well organized? If not, where does it break down?

6. Are all secondary and subordinate points tied to the original idea, focus, theory or argument? If not, which ones don't seem to fit?

7. Does the writer help me understand by giving examples?

8. Did I enjoy reading this piece? Why or why not? What emotions do I have while reading the piece?

9. Where do transitions need to be added or improved? In other words, where does the essay fail to "flow"?

READ MY ESSAY!!!!

RESPONDER_____ **AUTHOR**_____

ESSAY TITLE OR TOPIC_____

WHAT DID YOU REALLY LIKE ABOUT MY ESSAY?

WAS IT ENJOYABLE TO READ MY ESSAY?

HOW CAN I MAKE IT MORE ENJOYABLE?

WHAT IS ONE THING THAT I CAN IMPROVE?

READ MY ESSAY!!!!

RESPONDER_____ **AUTHOR**_____

ESSAY TITLE OR TOPIC_____

WHAT DID YOU REALLY LIKE ABOUT MY ESSAY?

WAS IT ENJOYABLE TO READ MY ESSAY?

HOW CAN I MAKE IT MORE ENJOYABLE?

WHAT IS ONE THING THAT I CAN IMPROVE?

APPENDIX 7

TOPICS MY STUDENTS WROTE ABOUT

1. Dreams and fantasies for careers
2. Whatever Guys Can Do, Girls Can do Better
3. The importance of books
4. What does it mean to be gifted?
5. Integrity
6. Self image in girls
7. Mother-daughter relationships
8. The war in Iraq
9. Video Games
 - Comparisons of various games
 - Discussion of violence in video games
 - Careers in creating video games
10. Music
 - Tributes to specific musicians
 - Explanations of the history of rap and hip-hop
 - Critiques of rap
 - Defenses of rap
 - What music has meant in the lives of individual students
11. Sports topics including:
 - Which is more difficult, indoor soccer or outdoor soccer?
 - Why doesn't Pittsburgh have a professional basketball team?
 - Who are the decision makers for the Steelers?
 - A comparison of professional hockey stadiums
 - Tributes to specific players
 - Predictions for the Pirate's season
 - Which colleges send the most players to the WNBA?
12. Diseases that someone close to the students suffers from.
13. Food essays about pasta, chewing gum, and cheese.
14. Do students get enough physical activity?
15. Fashion
16. A comparison of horoscope predictions from several magazines and newspapers.
17. Loosing Uncle Mark to a drunk driver
18. A better Puerto Rico
19. Fear of terrorism and a nuclear attack
20. What makes a good teacher?
21. What's so special about reality shows?
22. High School options for Pittsburgh students

APPENDIX 8

MAGAZINES THAT PUBLISH STUDENT WORK

CREATIVE KIDS MAGAZINE

P.O. Box 8813
Waco, TX 76714-8813
WEB SITE: <http://prufrock.com>

NEW MOON The Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams

34 E. Superior St. #200
Duluth, MN 55802
WEB SITE: www.newmoon.org

POTLUCK Children's Literary Magazine

Box 546
Deerfield, IL 60015-0546
WEB SITE: www.potluckmagazine.org

SKIPPING STONES: A Multicultural Magazine

P.O. Box 3939
Eugene, OR 97403-0939
WEB SITE: www.SkippingStones.org

STONE SOUP The Magazine by Young Writers and Artists

Published 6 times per year by the Children's Art Foundation.
P.O. Box 83
Santa Cruz, CA 95063
WEB SITE: www.stonesoup.com

TEEN INK

Box 30
Newton, MA 02461
WEB SITE: www.TeenInk.com

YOUNG VOICES MAGAZINE

P.O. BOX 2321
OLYMPIA, WA 98507
WEB SITE: www.youngvoicesmagazine.com

ACTIVE VOICE & PASSIVE VOICE

RULE: Avoid passive sentences that are unnecessarily wordy or weak!!!!

ACTIVE: My brother flew jet planes.

PASSIVE: Jet planes were flown by my brother.

The first sentence is called active because the subject performs the action. The word “passive” means “not active” or “acted on by some outside force.” The second sentence is called passive because the subject does not perform the action. It receives the action.

WHY IS ACTIVE BETTER THAN PASSIVE?

- 1. Active sentences are often more efficient: they say the same thing with fewer words.*
- 2. The verbs in active sentences tend to be more vivid.*

A PASSIVE SENTENCE CONTAINS THE FOLLOWING PARTS:

- 1. A subject that receives the action.*
- 2. A form of the verb be.*
- 3. The past participle form of the main verb.*
- 4. A prepositional phrase consisting of the preposition by and the person or thing that performs the action.*

DIRECTIONS:

Rewrite these passive sentences in active form:

1. The boy was bitten by the dog.
2. Research will be presented by Sam at the conference.
- 3.. Experiments have been conducted by scientists.
4. The brakes were slammed on by Susan as the car sped out of control.
5. Jim's bicycle has been damaged.
6. Action on the law is being considered by the committee.
7. A grade of A was given to Brittany by the teacher.
8. Near the end of the game, an illegal time-out was called by the coach.
9. For several years, Alyssa was raised by her grandmother.
10. Tall buildings and mountain roads were avoided by Frank because of his fear of heights.

USING STRONG, VIVID VERBS

<u>AVOID THE USE OF THESE VERBS!!!!</u>	
AM	HAVE
ARE	BE
IS	WAS
HAD	WERE
HAS	
ANY VERB ENDING IN "ING"	

DIRECTIONS: Rewrite the following sentences using strong, vivid verbs.

1. Susan is in agreement with Tyrone.
2. The professional fees in this project are entirely dependent upon the planning techniques.
3. The teacher is of the opinion that all children can write.
4. The cost of the trip will be between \$800 and \$900.
5. The flower is pretty, and it is in bloom.
6. Tiffany was in the living room.
7. Jennifer is going to Kennywood.
8. Michael has both an X-box and a Nintendo.
9. My grandma has liver cancer.
10. I was in total awe of the pure talent Baryshnikov had.

OUTSTANDING BEGINNINGS - NONFICTION ESSAYS

1. During my camping experiences, I loved everything; sleeping under the white stars on the brisk ground, setting up the tent (it was huge and confusing), even hanging up the food so that the small animals couldn't get to it. When the sun came up in the early morning, it looked like a golden orange, ripe as can be.

2. "Ted, stop clearing your throat, it's getting on my nerves." My family was on one of those very long, tedious car drives. We were driving from Pittsburgh, PA to Washington DC where we used to live. I was excited about visiting my friends, and the excitement was making me jumpy. A family of four people; my mom, dad, younger brother and me squashed into a little Saturn was definitely a recipe for trouble. My brother and I are practiced arguers, and the backseat of a car in the last hour of a five-hour car drive was the perfect place to bicker. I wasted no time.

3. Have you ever looked up into the night sky and wondered what was beyond the moon and clouds? I have and once I got a chance to see for myself what lay beyond the range of human sight. It was a warm summer night in the middle of Nevada. My family was on vacation and we had set up our tents in a nearly deserted campsite just off the road. A dry stream bed wound lazily around the northern edge and huge cottonwood trees towered above our frail, polyester tents.

4. Look around you at your life. If you have taken a very close look, you may have taken a notion to all the emphasis we as people put on our family television set. You may find that there is a strong impulse for people to make life simple and easy, they just sit on the couch and look endlessly at a television screen.

5. Haley's comet. A total eclipse. A millennium. Michael Jordan. What do these things have in common? Everything. They are all extraordinarily awesome and yet simplistically magnificent. A blip on the screen, a blur in our mind, a nanosecond against the backdrop of time. Enjoy them while you can, because you won't get a second chance.

6. "I'm fat." That's just one of the many negative things my friends say about themselves to me.

7. The moments when my feet would hit the cool grass and I would stretch out desperately in the shade were the whole of my summer days.

8. Three, two, one; let it rip! You feel the exhilaration as you pull the ripcord from the launcher. Your friend does the same. Your top clashes with your friend's. Wham! Right out of the stadium. You are declared the winner!

9. There were eight of us, all crammed into my mom's little Oldsmobile. It was snowing brutally outside as we drove through the streets of Pittsburgh. I remember feeling Abby's hot breath on me as I sat on George's lap, awaiting the time when we could all hop out of the little car. The CD player blared Marilyn Mason and Nirvana as we putting along on our way to the concert..

APPENDIX 12

PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOL CONTENT STANDARDS ADDRESSED IN THIS CURRICULUM UNIT

READING, WRITING, SPEAKING AND LISTENING

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform, and persuade, in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

5. All students demonstrate basic computer literacy, including word processing, software applications, and the ability to access the global information infrastructure, using current technology.