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## Writing about Literature

Write about your favorite character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Summarize the plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Write a character analysis of the lawyer in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Write a short story in which a character experiences the effects of racism.

Pretend you are a newspaper reporter. You have been asked to write an article about the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

These are the kinds of assignments teachers use to encourage responses to literature. Good teachers want to motivate their students to enjoy literature and to see the connection between literature and their own lives. Teachers know that students' enjoyment of literature is enhanced when they feel comfortable reading literature and have some tools for interpreting it. They also want their students to be able to evaluate literature, to recognize that reading good literature offers greater rewards for the reader than reading the kind of literature that demands very little from the reader and gives little in return.

Teachers want their students to know what it feels like to be the author of a literary work, even one as simple as a haiku poem or a short fable. Writing fiction can help students become more aware of the elements of fiction. This chapter discusses a variety of approaches to writing about literature to help students read with greater appreciation and understanding.

## *Writing about Literature*

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There is general agreement about the instructional value of writing about literature. A comprehensive summary of research that demonstrates some of these benefits can be found in *Writing about Literature* by Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen. These teacher-authors and others stress the value of writing for helping students understand and interpret what they read and encourage frequent writing assignments to accomplish this aim. For example, Anthony Petrosky says, "our comprehension of texts, whether they are literary or not, is more an act of composition—for understanding *is* composing rather than information retrieval, and that the best possible representation of our understanding of texts begins with certain kinds of compositions, not multiple choice tests or written free responses" (19). Petrosky criticizes the use of short answer tests because they encourage memorizing the details of literature but discourage interpretation and evaluation.

## *Responding to Literature: Three Dimensions*

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The questions we use for writing assignments reflect the kinds of responses to literature we hope to encourage. George Hillocks classifies responses to literature in terms of three dimensions: the cognitive, the affective, and the aesthetic. The cognitive dimension includes understanding the explicit and implicit meanings in the text, drawn from the author's use of "words, images, characters, and events" in the work. What Hillocks calls the "cognitive response" will sound familiar to you because it describes what we think of as the traditional approach to interpreting literature, which has as its purpose the discovery of the author's intentions. The affective dimension describes the emotional impact of the work on the reader, how the reader is affected by the work. The aesthetic dimension describes the pleasure we feel in the art and artifice of the work; it involves the total artistic impact of the work, the unique blend of words, images, and characters, and events. Hillocks says that although the reader can respond on each of these dimensions of the work, ultimately they cannot be isolated from one another. According to Hillocks, it is the inseparability of these three dimensions that makes literature a distinct way of knowing (Kahn 3).

Teachers who use writing routinely in their literature lessons agree that both formal and informal writing assignments can help students respond in all three dimensions. Many instructors begin the study of a literary work by assigning informal writing, such as journal entries. Informal writing gives students the opportunity to respond to a text without worrying about the elements of the formal paper. Informal writing can help students clarify their responses to literature on the cognitive, the affective, and the aesthetic dimensions. Hillocks, in *The Dynamics of English Instruction: Grades 7–12*, and

Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen, in *Writing about Literature*, argue that we should begin with the cognitive response. Hillocks says that “if the cognitive response is inadequate, the emotional, and aesthetic response may be inappropriate” (168). Hillocks gives this example. Students reading the title “Brother Timothy” as a statement of kinship rather than as a clerical title can easily misinterpret James Hanley’s story, “The Butterfly.” He points out that one student who read the word this way came up with an emotional response not related to the story. Although he agrees that in some cases the affective response may simply be a result of the students’ values or experiences, the cognitive response can help students judge whether their affective responses are justified. Furthermore, he argues, once students begin to explain their affective responses, how they feel about a work of literature, they draw on the cognitive or interpretive response. The two are almost inseparable. Hillocks says, “The two are so closely related, leading one to the other and back again, that they cannot be treated exclusively” (170).

The aesthetic response, in Hillocks’s classification, comes last because it is based on a combination of both the cognitive and affective responses: “. . . we seem to appreciate what a writer has done with language as we respond with understanding and feeling” (171). Only a reader who can interpret a work and understand its impact on him or her can evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques the author uses to achieve these effects. Then questions that belong in the aesthetic dimension such as “Are the last three lines of the poem necessary, in achieving its impact?” can be addressed. However, instructors should not wait until students have read widely before urging them to respond to the aesthetic dimension of a particular work. If we want students to learn how to evaluate the quality of the literature they read, then we should have them write about the aesthetic dimension routinely. For example, students who read and love the works of Judy Blume can be asked to judge her ability to develop character, one of her major strengths as an author of popular books for teens.

Hillocks believes that the cognitive dimension can be elicited through sequencing questions and related writing assignments on the basis of increasingly abstract levels of thinking. He identifies seven levels of thinking, three of which stress the literal level of comprehension and four types that stress the inferential level of comprehension. For example, students could write responses to *The Pearl*, by John Steinbeck, to encourage them to respond on all seven levels in the following list. *The Pearl* is the story of a Mexican fisherman whose great wealth, suddenly acquired by finding a large pearl, brings unhappiness to his people.

***Literal Level of Comprehension:***

1. *Basic Stated Information: Identifying frequently stated information which presents some condition crucial to the story. Example: What happened to Coyitoto?*

2. *Key Detail: Identifying a detail which appears at some key juncture of the plot and which bears a causal relation to what happens. Example: Where did Coyitoto sleep?*
3. *Stated Relationship: Identifying a statement which explains the relationship between at least two pieces of information in the text. Example: What were the beggar's reasons for following Kino and Juana to the doctor's house?*

#### ***Inferential Level of Comprehension:***

4. *Simple Implied Relationship: Inferring the relationship between two pieces of information usually closely juxtaposed in the text. Example: What were Kino's feelings about the pearls he offers the doctor?*
5. *Complex Implied Relationship: Inferring the relationship(s) among many pieces of information spread through large parts of the text. A question of this type, for example, would refer to the causes of character change. Example: What are the differences between the way Kino acts and feels at home and in town? Apart from what happened to Coyotito, explain the causes of the differences.*
6. *Author's Generalization: Inferring a generalization about the world outside the work from the fabric of the work as a whole. These questions demand a statement of what the work suggests about human nature or the human condition as it exists outside the text. Example: What comment or generalization does this chapter make on the way civilization influenced human behavior and attitudes? Give evidence from the story to support your answer.*
7. *Structural Generalization: Generalizing about how parts of the work operate together to achieve certain effects. To belong properly to this category, a question must first require the reader to generalize about the arrangement of certain parts of the work. Second, it must require an explanation of how those parts work in achieving certain effects. Example: Steinbeck presents a group of beggars in the story. a) Explain what purpose they serve in relationship to the first eleven paragraphs of the story. b) Present evidence from the story to support your answer. (Kahn 5)\**

These questions can form the basis of ungraded writing in class or more formal essays. Students can be taught how to write formal essays about literature incorporating these responses by using Stephen Toulmin's framework for developing arguments. Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen create a series of structured exercises for proceeding from interpreting literature to writing formal essays about literature, using this scheme. They argue that although students may eventually be able to make insightful interpretations of litera-

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ture using the Hillocks scheme, they will not necessarily be able to write successful essays if they are not taught the general rules of argument (7). They have found Toulmin's framework for developing arguments particularly useful for teaching students how to write essays about literature.

Toulmin identifies three basic parts of any effective argument: the claim, the data, and the warrant. The claim is the conclusion or the thesis statement, the data include the evidence for the claim, and the warrant is the explanation of why the data justify the claim, or, in other words, how you can make the connection between the data and the claim. For example, the thesis for a paper about *The Great Gatsby* might be, "Nick returns to the Midwest because of his disillusionment with New York society." The evidence in the essay would include Nick's comments about Gatsby "turning out all right" in the end, and his disgust with the behavior of other characters in the book, such as Tom and Daisy. The warrant would be a statement about disillusionment being related to recognizing the immorality of people whom you had previously admired.

Teachers can devise exercises and informal writing tasks for demonstrating the importance of claims, evidence, and warrants when writing about literature. The Evidence Abstract assignment, for example, teaches students how to accumulate and evaluate evidence to support their arguments:

### *Evidence Abstract*

Students have been given the following assignment:

At several points in *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby shows his love for Daisy. Do you believe that Daisy is in love with Gatsby? Write five specific examples or details from the novel that support your viewpoint.

A student might write the following Evidence Abstract to respond to this question:

### *Evidence Abstract: Student A*

Thesis: Gatsby's love for Daisy is demonstrated through his actions and his words.

1. Gatsby buys a house near Daisy's house in order to be near her.
2. When he sees the green light at the end of the dock, Nick thinks about Gatsby's attraction for Daisy.
3. Gatsby invites many people to his parties in the hope that Daisy will come.
4. Gatsby asks Nick to arrange a meeting with Daisy.
5. Gatsby tries to protect Daisy after she has run down Myrtle with Gatsby's car.

After students have written their drafts, based on their Evidence Abstracts, they can review each other's drafts to evaluate the quality of evidence in the draft. The following questions help them make that assessment.

### *Draft Review*

- A. For each paper, identify any statements that you believe are incorrect or do not support the student's viewpoint. Explain the problems you find.
- B. On each of the papers, which statements present specific evidence? Explain the reasons for your choices.
- C. On each of the papers, which statements are not specific enough? Explain the reasons for your choices.
- D. Write two additional examples that provide good, specific evidence to support your own conclusion.

Other prewriting assignments and revising assignments based on the Hillocks and Toulmin scheme for writing about poems, short stories, novels, and plays can be found in *Writing about Literature* (Kahn et al.).

### *Responding to Literature: The Reader-Response Approach*

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Many teachers agree with Louise Rosenblatt's theory of literary interpretation and have found it to be the most effective theory for developing a pedagogy for teaching literature at the secondary grade level. Rosenblatt says in *Literature as Exploration*:

*Surely of all the arts, literature is the most immediately implicated with life itself. The very medium through which a writer shapes the text—language—is grounded in the shared lives of human beings. Language is the bloodstream of a common culture, a common history. What might otherwise be mere vibrations in the air or black marks on a page can point to all that has been thought or imagined—in Henry James' phrases to "all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision." (165)*

In contrast to Hillocks, Rosenblatt places greater emphasis on the reader in interpreting literature, which explains why this approach to interpreting literature is called the reader-response approach. She says, "the basis for intelligent productive reading is in the unique, individual, perhaps idiosyncratic connection between readers and the text. . . . Meaning is the product of active minds and the words on the page—it does not reside in the ink, to be ferreted out, unearthed, uncovered" (168). However, Rosenblatt does not

believe that literary analysis should end with the spontaneous reaction of the reader to the work. The individual reader's response is only the beginning of the process of interpretation. Widely accepted interpretations of a particular work are the results of the sharing of many interpretations.

Rosenblatt's view of literature led her to formulate several principles for teaching literature, which have strong implications for designing writing assignments.

1. *Students must be free to deal with their own reactions.*
2. *There must be an opportunity for "an initial crystallization of a personal sense of the work."*
3. *The teacher should attempt to find points of contact among opinions of students.*
4. *The teacher's influence should be an elaboration of the vital influence inherent in the literature itself. (167)*

One method for applying Rosenblatt's principles to the classroom is to construct a set of questions such as those developed by Robert Probst. Probst recommends choosing approximately ten of these questions and placing each question to be used on a separate small page (4 × 5) stapled into a small book. This practice provides a place for students to jot down notes and encourages them to respond to each question fully. It also helps discussion later on, when students share their responses to the text. Probst says, "The questions suggest the possibility of moving from response to analysis without denying the validity of initial responses, of unique personal reactions and associations" (163). These general questions that follow can be used for reading various works (Newkirk). They permit students to focus initially on themselves and their own reactions to the work. Later questions encourage them to consider their classmates' views.

<i>Focus</i>	<i>Questions</i>
First reaction	What is your first reaction or response to the text? Describe or explain it briefly.
Feelings	What feelings did the text awaken in you? What emotions did you feel as you read the text?
Perceptions	What did you see happening in the text? Paraphrase it—retell the major events briefly.
Visual images	What image was called to mind by the text? Describe it briefly.

Associations	What memory does the text call to mind—of people, places, events, sights, smells, even of something more ambiguous, perhaps feelings or attitudes?
Thoughts, ideas	What idea or thought was suggested by the text? Explain it briefly.
Selection of textual elements	Upon what in the text did you focus most intently as you read—what word, phrase, image, or idea?
Judgments of importance	What is the most important word in the text? What is the most important phrase in the text? What is the most important aspect of the text?
Identification of problems	What is the most difficult word in the text? What is there in the text or in your reading that you have the most trouble understanding?
Author	What sort of person do you imagine the author of this text to be?
Patterns of response	How did you respond to the text—emotionally or intellectually? Did you feel involved with the text or distant from it?
Other readings	How did your reading of the text differ from that of your discussion partner (or the others in your group)? In what ways were they similar?
Evolution of your reading	How did your understanding of the text or your feelings about it change as you talked?
Evaluations	Do you think the text is a good one—why or why not?
Literary associations	Does this text call to mind any other literary work (poem, play, film, story—any genre)? If it does, what is the work and what is the connection between the two?
Writing	If you were asked to write about your reading of this text, upon what would you focus? Would you write about some asso-



ciation, some memory, some aspect of the text itself, about the author, or about some other matter?

Other readers

What did you observe about your discussion partner (or the others in your group as the talk progressed)? (Newkirk 171)

As the last question indicates, Rosenblatt emphasizes the importance of encouraging students to collaborate as they develop their interpretations.

### *Comparing Hillocks and Rosenblatt*

When students in my course on teaching writing are introduced to Rosenblatt's reader-response approach, they are immediately enthusiastic. They regret not having received writing assignments based on Probst's questions in their own English classes. They recall writing many "dry" papers about literature in high school. After we use *Ethan Frome* as a test case, and write responses to that text using these questions, students are even more convinced of the effectiveness of this approach.

My own experience teaching literature both on the high school and the college levels leads me to agree with them. Moving from "response to analysis without denying the validity of initial responses" (Probst 63) seems to engage students more successfully than starting off with an analysis paper. They seem more eager to work on analysis once they have had a chance to respond on a personal level. Hillocks's dimensional approach has much to offer once the students are ready for the analytical stage of the process. Many publications are available for implementing both the personal and the analytical stages of response. For example, Judith Langer's *Literature Instruction: A Focus on Student Response* reviews current classroom practices of reader-response theory and Michael Smith's *Understanding Unreliable Narrators: Reading between the Lines in the Literature Classroom* presents techniques for analyzing the role of the narrator in fictional works.

Both approaches to interpreting literature, George Hillocks's dimensions and Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response approach, can employ writing to help students record and clarify their responses to the text. In both cases, questions can become the cues for short, ungraded assignments or for more formal papers.

### *Teaching Literature and Critical Theory*

The teaching of literature has typically reflected current trends in literary criticism. However, although numerous theories are now routinely being applied to studying and explicating literature, most teachers still model the "new

criticism" perspective reflected in Hillocks's questions. More teachers are experimenting with reader-response strategies in their classrooms, but few teachers are applying the strategies of more recently developed critical theories, such as those underlying feminist criticism, new historical criticism, and deconstructionism, just to name a few. Although the limitations of this text do not permit an explanation of these theories, I do urge teachers to become familiar with them and to consider using them in the classroom. Some of these theories can be successfully applied at the secondary level, and, as one of the reviewers of this text commented, "[they] can open up literature in surprising ways to students." Texts such as Sharon Crowley's *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction* and Steven Lynn's *Texts and Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory* can introduce you to these theories and their possible classroom applications.

### *Writing the Formal Essay about Literature*

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The formal essay about literature, often written for a grade, teaches the student how to convince an audience to agree with his or her interpretation of a text. Thus far, we have examined one approach for teaching students the characteristics of the academic essay by introducing them to the concept of claim, evidence, and warrant.

Throughout this text, I have stressed the importance of experimenting with a variety of approaches for teaching writing skills, and that different approaches work well with different students. The formal essay can also be taught using a variety of techniques. For some students the concept of claim, evidence, and warrant may be too abstract. They may benefit from an approach to the formal essay that offers a series of questions related specifically to the assignment question. Here are several examples of related assignments about theme and character, which incorporate the elements of assignment design discussed in Chapter 6 and which can be assigned after students have had considerable experience using informal writing for responding to literature. These formal essays offer students an opportunity for integrating the variety of responses discussed in this chapter.

The first assignment includes suggested prewriting activities as well as criteria for evaluation. This assignment is designed for students in the eleventh grade, who have completed reading "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather and have been introduced to the concept of claim, evidence, and warrant. The second assignment invites students to use their own experiences to develop ideas about the theme of the story. The third requires students to integrate their interpretations with the affective and aesthetic response to the story.

**Assignment 1*****The "Paul's Case" Assignment***

Write a persuasive answer to the following question: Why does Paul leave home? Pretend that your audience is a group of teenagers who would like to help prevent teenagers from leaving home. Consider the following questions as you write the paper:

1. To what extent does Paul's father understand him?
2. To what extent do his teachers try to help him?
3. What does Paul want?
4. To what extent is Paul similar to the teenagers you know?

***Suggested Prewriting Activities***

List the qualities of a good parent.

List the qualities of a good teacher.

List the characteristic needs of teenagers.

***Form***

Write your paper in the form of an argument. Include a thesis statement (claim) in the introduction to your paper. In the body of the paper include evidence to support the claim, and the warrant, which will explain how the evidence is related to the claim. The warrant will be related to the fourth question, "Is Paul similar to the teenagers you know?" Conclude by suggesting how Paul's leaving home could have been prevented.

***Length***

3–4 pages.

***Criteria for Grading***

Papers that include a clear thesis statement (claim), sufficient evidence, and a warrant, and for the most part are correct, will receive an A. Papers that include all of these elements but contain minor errors in sentence structure and mechanics will receive a B. Papers that do not have a clear claim, sufficient evidence, or a clear warrant will receive a C. Because you will be permitted to revise, all students should eventually receive an A or a B.

**Assignment 2*****The Response Essay******Purpose***

The purpose of this essay is to write about the relationship of a significant theme in one of the stories we read, to your experience, common sense,

or point of view. By “significant,” I mean a theme that demonstrates that moral choices are difficult to make. You will need to decide if this theme or insight confirms your own experience, common sense, or point of view, or changes your point of view. In other words, does the story increase your understanding of how people behave or simply confirm what you already know to be true?

#### *Developing the Essay*

Develop the essay by explaining how you know the author is trying to express this theme. For example, you can discuss the consequences of the character’s actions. Then explain your reasons for finding this theme significant.

#### *Concluding the Essay*

There are several possibilities for concluding the essay. You may reflect on other insights in the story you could not develop or you may compare the story to other stories that attempt to deal with the subject of the story in different ways.

#### *Length*

3–4 pages.

### *Assignment 3*

#### *The Character Analysis Essay*

##### *Purpose*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the techniques by which an author creates a character through an in-depth study of a character in the story you wrote about in the first paper.

In your first paper you commented on a theme or insight you believed to be significant. This theme helped to explain how characters relate to one another. For example, some students writing about “Hills Like White Elephants” said that Ernest Hemingway shows that when people are selfish, they often hurt one another. Some students writing about “Death of a Traveling Salesman” commented that Eudora Welty says that people are insensitive to each other’s needs.

In this paper I would like you to try to explain one of the character’s motives for behaving the way he or she does in greater detail by:

- a. identifying the character’s values or character traits (at least three examples—self-respect, honesty, success, etc.).
- b. indicating the techniques by which the author creates this character. Does the author use direct or indirect methods, for example, statements about the character, the character’s actions and words, or what other characters say about the character?

*Developing the Essay*

Most of the essay will consist of examples from the story that demonstrate the author's methods of creating character.

*Concluding the Essay*

Conclude the essay by deciding if the author has been successful in creating the character. Does the author give you enough information for understanding the character, for liking or disliking the character?

*Length*

3–4 pages.

*Literature Papers: Stylistic Conventions*

When students are ready to write a formal essay about literature, they can learn the conventions of style described in the following list adapted from Barbarouse (40).\*

*Literary Essay Conventions*

- Use the present tense when discussing works of literature and events within those works.
- Use the past tense only when discussing events that have happened in the past, whether in the author's life or in the story itself.
- Work quotations into your paper smoothly, conforming to correct sentence structure and grammatical form. Quotations should always have lead-ins.
- Incorrect: "I have been acquainted with the night" (543). This is an example of Robert Frost's metaphorical language in his poem, "Acquainted with the Night."
- Correct: Robert Frost uses metaphorical language in his poem "Acquainted with the Night," in which he describes his loneliness as his acquaintance with the night (543).
- Quotations should not be overly long; instead they should become a part of the text, acting as support for your points.
- Use parenthetical documentation for all quotes and include a Works Cited page, according to MLA (Modern Language Association) documentation style.
- Identify works of literature correctly. Titles of novels and plays should be underlined or italicized (e.g., a novel, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and a play, *The Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller). Titles of short stories and poems should be enclosed within quotation marks (e.g., "The

\*Barberousse, Deborah. *A Brief Guide to Writing about Literature*. Copyright © 1994 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Used with permission.

Fall of the House of Usher," a short story, and "The Raven," a poem, both by Edgar Allan Poe).

- Avoid contractions and colloquialisms.

### *Writing about Literature: Alternatives to the Essay*

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When students are not ready to learn how to write the formal essay about literature, they can write in forms that are less demanding to express their responses to literature. For example, in *Just Teach Me Mrs. Krogness*, Mary Mercer Krogness describes her experience teaching literature to students, who not only lacked previous experience writing about literature, but also had serious skill deficiencies and behavior problems.

Krogness tells about her years in Shaker Heights Middle School teaching adolescents who had failed in traditional classrooms. These students scored in the 70's, 80's, and 90's on the IQ test and they had scored at below the local third stanine in reading, comprehension, and vocabulary on the Standard Achievement Test. Nearly all of them were grouped in the lower tracks. She had heard about the low test scores, the negative teacher assessments, but nothing prepared her for the students she was to encounter—their recalcitrance, short attention spans, outlandish behavior, or worse, stony passivity and apparent lack of interest in learning. She says, "They were overage, underprepared, and weighted down with serious emotional baggage. But an occasional glimpse of their creativity and their fetching personalities captured my imagination, even though too many came to class ready to 'pick with' each other" (2).

Krogness's students had previously been taught through exercises and drills. Her aim was to "hook these students on talking, reading, and writing, to immerse them in language and give them plenty of practice doing what they'd learned not to like or feel good about" (18). She began by experimenting with unconventional kinds of assignments, assignments that were unlike the academic assignments they had already failed to master, and chose topics that might have personal interest for them. For example, she often had them write in the form of newspaper articles. She hoped that as they assumed the role of "reporters," they would leave behind their student personas, which they associated with failure. After reading *Julius Caesar*, they were given the following assignment.

You and your teammates are investigative reporters: You have just heard rumors that Julius Caesar, the prospective emperor of Rome, will be assassinated on the Ides of March, March 15. The five of you are to interview various people who might have feelings, opinions, knowledge, or concerns about his death or the threat to his life.

The class talked briefly about what it's like to be a reporter. Krogness helped them to formulate interview questions. She gave them a list of facts, which they developed into these questions:

*Sample Interview:*

1. Brutus, what is your relationship with Caesar?
2. Soothsayer, how do you know that Julius will be murdered tomorrow?
3. Man in the Street, do you know anything about a plot to kill Caesar?

The assignment was very successful. Students wrote lively accounts of the mock interviews.

When she assigned fairy tales, Krogness's students wrote their own fairy tales. In class they discussed fairy tale themes, "good struggling to overcome evil, generosity struggling to overcome greed, humility struggling to overcome arrogance, and so forth." Through brainstorming sessions they imagined the personalities of wizards, genies, and gremlins, and wrote some excellent fairy tales as a result (155).

At Thanksgiving Krogness assigned Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. She says, "After we heard King's stirring speech, I asked the students to respond in writing." She gave two assignments: "broad enough to give each writer latitude, yet specific enough to help him or her focus:"

1. Write a paragraph about the dreams you have for yourself;
2. Write a second paragraph about the dreams you have for the world.

Krogness was constantly searching for topics and writing assignments that would "hook seventh and especially eighth graders on literature." She concludes by saying, "My students had begun the difficult transition from mostly working their way through packaged writing kits, filling in blanks, and writing short answers to questions to thinking independently. But the process would take time. Each experience that engaged them in real inquiry contributed to changing their perceptions of themselves as well" (145).

### *Emphasizing the Reciprocal Nature of Writing and Reading*

Many teachers adopt methods that consistently emphasize the reciprocal nature between reading and writing. "Reading helps students write better and writing helps students read better," says Nancy Atwell. "I never asked my students to relate reading and writing—nor sponsor activities calling on kids to make reading-writing connections. It happens naturally, inevitably, in

workshop settings. In writing workshop conferences and mini-lessons we talk about what authors do. In reading workshop conferences (the journals) and mini-lessons we talk about what authors do. It doesn't take very long for students to begin to bring knowledge and expertise from one area to the other—to view literacy as both considering and trying what authors do" (226).

For example, after a discussion about writing "leads" for essays in an eighth grade class, a student said that when she was trying to decide what book to read next, she looked at the leads in short stories they were reading. In a writing workshop, after a reading mini-lesson on leads in *One Fat Summer* by Robert Lipsyte, *A Ring of Endless Light* by Madeline L'Engle, and *That Was Then, This Is Now* by S. E. Hinton, another student said "I think my lead is all fouled up. It doesn't really attract my attention like the books you read to us. I'm trying to tell too much about the whole camp. Maybe I should just begin with the lecture by the Detroit Pistons' coach. That way people will get some good stuff right from the start like in *One Fat Summer*" (Atwell 227).

At the half point during the year, Atwell asked this question: "As a writer do you think you learn from other authors' writing—what you read?" The class response was a unanimous, "yes." Atwell posed two follow-up questions: "If so, who has influenced your writing? What kinds of things do you do differently in your own writing because of the author(s)?" Students named three kinds of literary influences: professional authors, other students, and Atwell herself. They were able to mention specific borrowings. These borrowings took three forms: Students borrowed genres, trying a new mode after reading another author's writing; students borrowed topics and themes; a student borrowed both the content and verse form from a teacher's poem, and students borrowed specific literary techniques from authors they had read.

Unfortunately, many students believe that all borrowing is plagiarism. Because of the heavy emphasis placed on originality in our schools, students are often very reluctant to imitate other authors. Atwell's lessons illustrate that when students are invited to borrow genres, topics, themes, and techniques, when they are told that all great authors are great borrowers, they become aware of the benefits of imitation. They are often surprised to learn that the devices used in fiction, such as imagery and metaphor, can enhance their style of writing in expository essays.

### *Writing Fiction, Poetry, and Plays*

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Teachers can also assign the writing of literature—poems, short stories, and plays—not only to help students appreciate the literature they read, but as a technique for teaching exposition.



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# *Teaching Writing in Middle and Secondary Schools*

*Theory, Research, and Practice*

*Margot Iris Soven*  
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*To my parents, Paul and Esther Korman*

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