“Between 1996 and 2006, the average level of literacy required for all occupations rose by 14 percent. Both dropouts and high school graduates demonstrate significantly worse reading skills than they did ten years ago.” ~Kelly Gallagher, Readicide, 2009.

"Any book that helps a child to form a habit of reading, to make reading one of his deep and continuing needs, is good for him." ~Maya Angelou

“I believe each of my students must craft an individual reading life of challenge, whim, curiosity, and hunger, and I’ve discovered that it is not too late in high school to lead a nonreader to reading. It’s never too late.” ~Penny Kittle, Book Love, 2013

www.pennykittle.net
www.booklovefoundation.org
@pennykittle
Supporting Independent Reading
to increase Stamina, Fluency, & Joy

Time
Students need time to read in class in order to create a habit of reading and set the
stage for homework reading, and teachers need reading time to confer individually
with students about their choices, stamina, engagement, and goals. Students need
time to discuss choices with classmates, time to analyze their progress, and time to
practice fluency & comprehension strategies under the direction of the teacher.

Choice
Students need to make choices in reading that reflect their interests because interest
drives engagement. Teachers should encourage wide reading in all genres as well as
students who pursue an author or genre study. Allow students to reread favorite
books and to abandon a book that no longer interests them.

Response
Teacher conferences are the primary tool for assessing progress, encouraging goal-
setting and reflection, and analyzing student needs. Students will reflect on reading
in writing (themed notebooks & writing notebooks), facilitate discussions in small
groups, join blogs or reading sites for discussions outside of class, and respond
regularly to other readers in the room.

Vision
Daily book talks present a wide range of voices, styles of text, categories of interest,
etc. and are essential for helping students develop their own ‘to read next’ lists. We
must commit to helping students define themselves as readers who like…

Expectations
All readers will develop the stamina to read longer and with greater fluency with
daily practice. A reading rate is calculated regularly and students are expected to
meet a weekly goal based on the challenge of the current selected text. All readers
will update book lists, set goals, and read regularly each week at home.

Challenge
Monitor reading lists & teach all students to analyze choices and increase challenge;
set goals based on progress towards college expectations: 200-600 pages/week; create
reading ladders that help students find books of increasing difficulty within a genre;
book talk a wide variety of choices including classics and world literature.

Modeling
Use short mentor texts to increase complexity & demands on readers; model
storyboarding to help students understand the craft construction in short stories &
novels; model your choices as a reader: post your reading list, share books you
love; show thinking & annotations in a mentor text and model “fix-it” comprehension
strategies.
Book Talk Essentials

Hold the book. I check it out from our school library or pull it off the shelf in my classroom. I hold it so kids can see the number of pages and the cover.

Know the book. I have read it (usually), but if I haven’t, I’ll say why I chose to booktalk it when I haven’t read it yet. It might be the newest release from an author that I love or I know students love. Or someone I trust sold me on it. When I know the book I can briefly summarize its theme, central conflict, or other details in a fast summary of a minute or so, like a taste test. I connect the book to other books in my library, “—if you like Death and Dying books, this one is probably for you,” or “—all action, fast plot, the kind that makes your heart race,” or, “—if you like Sherman Alexie, then you’ll love Jimmy Santiago Baca.”

Read a short passage. I preface this by saying, “I think it helps for you to hear a little bit of the text. See if the narrator’s voice appeals to you. Listen to see if this sounds like a book you can see yourself reading.” I have always selected the passage ahead of time and I try to find a place where the action is heated or the prose is breathtaking or the voice comes through with intensity. (Like the list of 10 Things They Don’t Teach You About High School in Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson.) And it is critical that I read this slowly, with emphasis and clarity. When I skip this part because I didn’t prepare ahead of time and there’s so much to do that day, fewer kids choose the book. Hearing the voice of a text sells the book and sells kids on reading.

Keep records. I walk to the back of the room where I have a poster labeled “Book Talks” near our library. I write down the title and author on this list and return the book to the shelf, or put it on the table to go back to the library. Teachers tell me it is helpful to keep a list with passages from books recorded on notecards for the next round of book talks the following year, which is smart, but I’ve never managed to be that organized.

Accept help. Students, parents, fellow teachers, librarians or book store owners as well as administrators can be good sources for book talks. You are not in this alone. There are book trailers on youtube, created by both authors and publishers, and some include quick talks with the author. But you also have to be in this: you have to know books and talk about them. If you’re not leading from your own reading life, not many will follow.

Remember how important you are. Your passion is contagious. As Samantha Bennett wrote on her blog, “Sharing things with kids that delight us, make our eyes light up, and our brains cackle, and our hearts grow bigger should be the learning target every day. Don’t dumb it down... make it into the miraculous event it is, every time. Every single time you find a book that moves you, it is a tiny miracle.”

~from Book Love, p. 60-61
Possible Conference Questions

Questions that Monitor a Reading Life:

What are you reading? How did you choose it?
How do you find good books?
What’s on your Next list?
Which authors are your favorites?
How much did you read last year?
Do you consider yourself a reader?
Where do you read at home?

Questions that drive a Teaching Reading Strategies conference:

How is the reading going for you?
Is this an easy or a hard read for you? How do you know?
Tell me about a time when this book has confused you and what you’ve done to get yourself back on track in your understanding.
Tell me about these characters—who they are, what do you think of them?
What questions are at the heart of this book? What questions might the author be trying to answer through the struggles of these characters?
I see you’re almost finished with the book. When you think back over the way a character has changed in this story, can you point to specific moments when something was revealed about this character? Could you make a claim about this character and support it with evidence from the text?
How is this book different from the last book you read?

Questions that drive a conference to Increase Complexity and Challenge:

What else have you read by this author?
What other books have you read that are as difficult as this one?
Which books on your next list are challenging?
Have you considered how to push yourself as a reader?
Which genres have you read this year?
Tell me about a genre you don’t usually read and lets think about books that might ease the transition from what you love to what will challenge you to think differently.
Tell me about a book you’ve dropped this year. Why did you drop it?
How are the books you’ve been reading this year similar?
Conference Script: Robert, September
Penny Kittle

So prior to this one, when was the last book you read?
   I don’t know. I did not read any books last year.
And you’re a senior?
   Yes.
(Did you read in) 10th grade?
   I read in 10th grade.
You did? What happened last year?
   I didn’t take an English class.
How did you get away with not taking an English class?
   I took online classes. I took history and math online.
And you took English online?
   I was supposed to but I never got to it.
So that’s why you’re in my night class.
   It is.
So you don’t usually read for homework. And how about this one? Not yet. Mainly
(you’re reading) during reading break here at school, but not elsewhere. So if I think I
can transform you into a kid who wants to read when you leave school… (he laughs) The
likelihood of that?
   Not very.
Seriously?
   Yeah. I read once in awhile at home, but..
What if it was so good that you wanted to read it?
   I don’t know.
Maybe?
   Maybe.
That might be the book.
   I don’t know. I’ve had a couple of books like that. But even then I only read in
school. When I’m not in school I don’t really do much with school.
On your next list you’ve got Butter and Thirteen Reasons Why. Those are good books,
good books for next. Cody’s reading this one: right here.
   And Cody said he likes it which is weird. I’ve never seen that kid read.
I know. So I’m going to put up there on the board under Best Night of My Pathetic Life,
Butter, and put your name up there because it’s going to have a waiting list. That way
you’ll get it.
   It might take me awhile to finish this book.
It might not. You might actually want to read so much that you actually read at home.
My Ideal Bookshelf

Fill in the titles of the ten books you can’t live without. You may want to use pencil. And feel free to add more books on either end if ten won’t suffice. Scan or photograph the finished shelf and submit it to idealbookshelf.com or share it on Twitter with #myidealbookshelf.
Q1 Reading Ladder: Analyzing your reading progress

**Purpose:** to step back and look at what you have accomplished as a reader in order to measure progress and set new goals for quarter two and the rest of the school year.

**Process:**

1. **Create a Reading Ladder to show your progress this quarter.** A reading ladder, in this case, is a table with the books you’ve read listed in order of most difficult to easiest reading. There are lots of ways to define ‘most difficult’ but some you may consider: the size of the text and the number of pages, the subject matter (high school romance is easier to follow than a memoir from Iraq since the memoir will likely include references to places you don’t know and require more complex thinking than pleasure reading), the speed with which you finished the book (it is harder to begin again each time you set down reading material and let time pass and pick it up again), vocabulary and/or whether this was a new author or a well-known one to you. I want your gut feel for difficulty in the books you’ve read so far.

2. **Write a short (3-8 sentences) review of each book you finished this quarter.** Note: if you read more than ten books, you only need to review your top 3. The others will be listed on your ladder.

3. **Add up the total pages read, and divide by weeks in the quarter to determine your average pages read per week.** Compare this to your reading rate. Discuss if you are challenging yourself to read more and increase your stamina in order to prepare yourself for complex reading in college or the workplace, or if you are just reading in class and in reading break and a little here and there at home, but not making a significant difference in your stamina and creating a reading habit.

4. **Set goals for quarter 2 and the rest of the school year.** These should be specific: I will read 15 books by June. I will read at least one non-fiction book. I will read one Jane Austen novel. I will develop an at-home reading habit. I will...

Due: today, at the end of the period

Q2, 3, & 4 Reading Ladders: Answer these same questions, ordering books by complexity, reviewing goals and setting new ones, analyzing reading rate & progress, and answering an essay question about reading:

I am a reader who...
Does choice in your reading matter to you? Why?
Discuss a theme in one of the books you read this quarter. Analyze its development in the book and what you learned from the author's treatment of it.
Analyze the writing craft in a book you read this quarter.
Write about an author's work if you have read at least two books by one author.
Possible Topics for Reading Response "Big Idea" Notebooks

These come from commonly taught themes in literature

Belief
Forgiveness
Oppression
Discipline
Decisions
Death & Dying
Love
Acceptance
Courage
Change
Empathy
Life Lessons (like Crime Doesn't Pay)
Overcoming Adversity
Man Struggles Against Nature
Man Struggles Against Societal Pressure
Man Struggles to Understand God
Friendship
Sacrifice
The Bonds of Family
Yin & Yang
Suffering
Conflict
Abandonment
Alienation
Ambition
Coming of Age
Freedom
Gender
Justice
Isolation
Cruelty
Fate
Hope
Guilt
Big Idea Books

These notebooks are for us to share. I write in them; you write in them. A Big Idea Book is a multi-year conversation because I keep these and recycle them each year. You’re talking across time to students who are stumbling along through elementary or middle school right now, but will one day sit where you are.

The meat of a Big Idea Book is your thinking. I want you digging for what is beneath the story you’re reading. You chose this book (this theme) for a reason. You can see how it connects to what is happening or what is explored in the book you’re reading. You might connect the ideas or situations in the book to something in yourself or another book you’ve read. You might take the ideas in the book and go farther with them… thinking as you write.

You are doing a mini-book talk for someone who comes upon your words later. Try not to give away anything important that the reader would rather discover on his own: you know how you hate that! You can skim a Big Idea Book and find a dozen book talks from students like you. Add the titles to your NEXT list and you’ll have a supply of answers when you’ve finished one book and can’t decide what to read next.

Rules for civil discourse in community writing:

1. Be respectful. Do not use profanity. Do not use someone else’s name without permission.
2. You only need to sign your entry if you want to. Sometimes we send words out into the world as a gift without attribution.

Trust the writer inside of you. Just Write.
Non-fiction Reading Challenge
Q3, Mrs. Kittle’s writing classes

Purposes:
- To introduce you to one of the many wonderfully written non-fiction books that will teach you a lot about the world as well as challenge you as a reader.
- To increase the amount of time we talk about books and you, in particular, talk about your reading. Small groups allow all members the chance to talk more.
- To give you lots of evidence to support an argument you will be writing after break week. (I would suggest you use Post-its to mark pages where you learn things that might be used to support a position in an argument. We’ll talk about this in class.)
- To keep you moving up a reading ladder of challenging, complex reading.

Book choices:
*Start Something That Matters* by Blake Mycoskie
*The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* by Nicholas Carr
*The Big Shot* by Michael Lewis
*Moneyball* by Michael Lewis
*It’s Not About the Bike* by Lance Armstrong
*No Easy Day* by Mark Owen
*Argo* by Antonio Mendez
*No Matter How Loud They Shout* by Edward Humes
*In the Land of Invisible Women* by Onata A Ahmed
*And Still We Rise* by Miles Corwin
*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot
*The Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Michael Pollan
*In Defense of Food* by Michael Pollan
*Food Rules* by Michael Pollan
*Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand
*I am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced* by Nujood Ali
*The Forever War* by Dexter Filkins
*An Invisible Thread* by Laura Schroff & Alex Tresniowski
*The Pirates of Somalia* by Jay Bahadur
*Beyond the Dance: a Ballerina’s Life* by Chan Hon Goh
*Jack Kennedy* by Chris Matthews
*A Place to Stand* by Jimmy Santiago Bacca
*Eleven Seconds* by Travis Roy
*Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo
*Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell

You may select a book that is not on this list as long as you can locate enough copies and have brought it to me to preview.
GET STARTED NOW.... (things in bold must be completed today.)

- **Choose a group** of at least 3 and not more than 4 people to read with.
- **Choose a book** that all members feel they can read over the next four weeks (which includes February break week).
- **Create a schedule** for how much to read before discussion in class each day. There are eight class days to prepare for. This reading can count as your homework reading during this unit. If you want to continue to read your own books, I support that, but please do not get behind in the group reading. All are depending on you.

READING CIRCLES START FRIDAY, FEB. 2

Read what is on your schedule and come to class prepared to discuss with your group.

Mark passages that make you think or you wonder about or those you don’t understand. These are good places to go to if you discussion in class slows down.

As a group, think about the arguments that might arise over the content in your book. Think of questions people might have or objections to some of what you read. Discuss where you might go to gain more information about a topic covered.

If you are absent on a discussion day, you will need to write your group a two-page reflection in your notebook about the reading. This will be a replacement for the discussion grade you will miss that day.

A book talk □ success depends on energy.

The □ fly south in the winter.

This □ chattering makes writing class entertaining.

The □ horrible haircuts made them run for their □.
Analyzing Writing Craft in Independent Reading

This is called ‘rhetorical reading’ and it means to break the text down into the sum of its parts... to determine what the writer was trying to achieve and which writing strategies he/she used to try to achieve it. A rhetorical analysis is always looking at the why and the how of the writing.

1. Read one whole chapter of your book today. When finished, go back and skim read to map out what happens in this chapter in your notebook. Write about how the author put the chapter together. Consider what we’ve studied that writers do to move the action: flashback, zoom in, zoom past, narrator aside, etc.
   a. **Day 2**: consider the development of the chapter above and explain why you think the author wrote this chapter at this point in the story in this way.
2. Find several interesting sentences and copy them into your notebook. Annotate them to show what makes them interesting to you. This is an author’s craft question, so I am looking for observations you can make about a writer’s choices in this section that you find interesting.
3. Focus on one of the lenses for reading that we have focused on so far in second and third readings of poetry: word choice, voice, sensory details, tone, or pace. Now apply that to a section from your independent reading book. Write about what you noticed when you reread the section with this lens.
4. Make observations about punctuation today. Does your author favor short or long sentences? What moves in writing craft would you say are common for this particular writer?
5. Take one section of dialogue from your reading today. Analyze what is said (what you learn about plot or character) and then what is NOT said. What are these characters withholding?
6. Style is tricky... sometimes we love the way a writer writes and sometimes we get irritated by too many narrators or moments when we lose our way (yes, I’m talking about that second narrator in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* again)... how was the reading of this book for you? Explain what you loved/grew frustrated with/etc. What would you say to the author (if you could) about how this was written?

Analyzing Text Structures in Independent Reading

1. How important are time and place (setting) in your book? Would anything be lost if your novel were set in a different period of time or in a very different location?
   a. If you are currently reading non-fiction, consider the date of publication of the book. If the book is more than two years old, search online for how the field studied in this book has changed in the last two years.
b. If you are currently reading non-fiction that is place-specific (memoir, war stories, etc.) consider how the setting impacts your understanding of the book. Did you come to the book with strong background knowledge in the area? If not, how did you overcome your ignorance?

2. Consider the narrator of your story. What do you know about him/her? Do you trust him/her? Explain what makes the narrator reliable or not. What do you question about what the narrator says at this point in the narrative? How does the narrator affect your sympathies for other characters?
   a. If the narrator is the author (often true in non-fiction), do you trust this author? Why or why not? What do you think this author does not see clearly or should research more thoroughly?

3. Consider the title of your book. Explain why you think it was chosen. How does the title give meaning to the work?

4. How does the writer arrange ideas in this text? Is there any pattern to this arrangement?

5. Consider the arrangement of ideas in this text. Is it chronological? Alternating between a forward chronology and flashbacks? (If so, why so?)

Analyzing Literary Elements in Writing

1. Skim reread sections of your book. Look for repeating images, motifs, or repetitions and consider their implications on the larger body of work here. What can you find? What might you continue to pay attention to as you read?

2. Literature often uses a specific story to explain something larger about humankind. Can you see connections between the story you are reading and the characters’ conflicts, revelations, or insights that might also be true for all people?

3. Conflicts in literature can be internal, external, or both. Which do you see in your book at this point? Explain how they contribute to your overall engagement with the text.
   a. Writers are skillful with weaving in sub-conflicts and multiple story lines. If you see this in your story, explain how this has impacted your understanding and engagement with the story. (*Game of Thrones* readers—I don’t mean ALL of them!)
   b. Writers create conflicts on three levels in literature: conflicts within the character, conflicts between characters, and conflicts with something outside the character: the world or God, perhaps. What do you see happening in your book?
   c. Have you ever noticed how authors put obstacles in the way of characters resolving conflicts? Find them in your book.

4. Language is central to writing and it is chosen with care. How does this writer use language? Is it formal? Informal? Technical? Slang? Does the language change throughout this piece?
5. Some writers use humor to identify one character or to present ideas in a text. Do you see evidence of humor? Puns? Irony? Sarcasm? Why might the author have used them in this book?

6. There are several comparison devices available to writers: similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, etc. Can you find examples of any of these in your text? If not, why not?

Vocabulary

You know I believe that the single best way to increase your vocabulary is through wide reading. Now I want you to show me how...

1. Find a word that you didn’t know before you read, but feel you understand after reading it in this book. Write the passage where the word occurred and then explain how the words around the word you didn’t know helped you understand it.

2. Collect at least four words a week from your writing. Keep them in your vocabulary section of your notebook. Look up the definitions and then determine how it was used in the book you’re reading. Here’s the big challenge: start using them! See if you can slip them into conversation. (I suggest you pay attention to pronunciation keys in the dictionary or ask me for help. Many words sound differently than they look.)
Death deals the cards. They whisper across the shaky table. Hernandez sticks a cigar in his mouth. Dumbo tucks his wife’s letter in his helmet. Loki spits and curses. Roy sips his coffee. We pull the cards toward us and laugh.

I don’t remember what my wife looked like, but I recognize Death. She calls for our bets, wearing a red dress, her beautiful face carved out of stone. My friends laugh and lie, already deep in the game.

I remember what my little girl looks like. I remember the smell of her head. The scar on her left knee. Her lisp. Peanut butter and banana. I don’t think she remembers me.

Death rattles bone dice in her mouth, clicking them against her teeth. She spits them on the table and they roll.

We bet it all, throw everything on the line because the air is filled with bullets and grenades. We won’t hear the one that gets us, but it’s coming.

She tells us to show our hands.

We have never been so alive.


Fully assimilated zombies.

I could laugh at them when I was with Gracie. When I walked through their herd in the east wing hall—alone—I was transformed from my confident freakself into a gawping pile of self-concious self-loathing. Their shiny-teeth smiles made happiness look easy. They never tripped over their own feet. They could laugh without snorting and tease each other without sounding dumb. They could remember being six years old together and eight and eleven and giggle about all of it.

The flaunts, the taunts, the poses, they were all part of the lie. My brain understood this because I’d heard the whispers. The Honor Society officers who started their day off with a little weed that melted stress like chocolate. The cheerleaders who cut themselves where the scars wouldn’t show. Debate team members busted for shoplifting. Mommy’s pills being shared like cookies, and the way Daddy’s vodka made first-period Latin fly by.

As I walked down the east wing hall, I could feel their sticky fingers reaching for my brain. Puffs of yellow smoke curled toward my ears, my eyes, my nose and mouth. The hivemind wanted to penetrate and infect. Colonize. The danger was so real, so close, I didn’t dare open my mouth to ask directions. Or to howl.
As a young child, I loved the sleepy silence and dreamy colors of Tehran’s early mornings: they made me feel light and free, almost invisible. This was the only time of day when I could wander inside my mother’s beauty salon; I could walk between the styling chairs and hair dryers without making her angry. One morning in August 1972, when I was seven, I picked up her favorite crystal ashtray. It was almost the size of a dinner plate. She had told me a million times not to touch it, but it was beautiful, and I wanted to run my fingers over its delicate patterns. I could see why she liked it so much. In a way, it looked like a giant snowflake that never melted. As far back as I could remember, this ashtray had been in the middle of the glass table, and my mother’s customers, women with long, red fingernails, sat in the waiting chairs, which were covered with a fuzzy white fabric, and flicked their cigarettes over it. Sometimes they missed, and the ashes landed on the table. My mother hated it when the table got dirty. Whenever I made a mess, she screamed at me and made me clean up. But what was the point of the cleaning? Things got dirty all the time.

I held the ashtray up. A gauzy, golden light poured in through the room’s only window, which covered more than half the southern wall. The light reflected off the white ceiling and spread inside the ashtray’s sparkling, transparent body. As I tilted it to look at it from another angle, it slipped through my fingers. I tried to catch it, but I was too late: it hit the floor and shattered.

“Marina!” my mother called from my parents’ bedroom, which was adjacent to the salon.

I ran to my left and through the door that led to the dark, narrow hallway, dashed to my bedroom, and crawled under my bed. The air smelled of dust and made my nose itch, so I held my breath to prevent a sneeze. Although I couldn’t see my mother, I could hear the sound of her rubber slippers against the linoleum floor; their angry rhythm made me squeeze closer to the wall. She called my name again and again, but I remained as still as possible. When she entered my room and stood next to my bed, I heard my grandmother ask her what had happened. My mother told her that I had broken the ashtray, and Grandma said I had not broken it; she said she had dropped it while cleaning. I couldn’t believe what I had heard. Grandma told me that liars went to hell when they died.

“You broke it?” my mother asked.

“Yes. I was dusting the table. It was an accident. I’ll clean up in a minute,” Grandma answered.

After a little while, my bed creaked under someone’s weight. I lifted my old beige bedspread a few inches from the floor and saw my grandmother’s brown slippers and her slim ankles. I crawled out from under the bed and sat next to her. As always, her gray hair was gathered in a tight bun behind her head. She wore a black skirt and a perfectly ironed white blouse and stared straight ahead at the wall. She didn’t look angry.

“Bahboo, you lied,” I said.

“I lied.”

“God won’t get mad at you.”
“Why not?” she raised an eyebrow.
“Because you saved me.”
She smiled. My grandmother rarely smiled. She was a serious woman who knew how everything was supposed to be done. She always had the answer to the most difficult questions and had never failed to cure a stomachache.

Grandma was my father’s mother and lived with us. She went grocery shopping at about eight o’clock every morning, and I usually went along with her. That day, like many others, she grabbed her purse, and I followed her down the stairs.

~excerpt from *Prisoner of Tehran* by Marina Nemat
His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman’s, his nose was undamaged, there was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, his clean black hair was swept upward like a cowlick at the rear of his skull, his forehead was slightly freckled, his fingernails were clean, the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in three ragged strips, his right cheek was smooth and hairless, there was a butterfly on his chin, his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was this wound that had killed him.

~Tim O’Brien, The Things They Carried

He would wake up in eastern Baghdad, inhale its bitter, burning air, and say it. “It’s all good.” He would look around at the fundamentals of what his life had become—his camouflage, his gun, his body armor, his gas mask in case of a chemical attack, his atropine injector in case of a nerve gas attack, his copy of The One Year Bible next to his neat bed, which he made first thing every morning out of a need for order, his photographs on the walls of his wife and children, who were home in Kansas in a house shaded by American elm trees and with a video in the VCR of him telling the children the night before he left, “Okay. All right. It’s time to start the noodles. I love you. Everybody up. Hut hut”—and say it. “It’s all good.” He would go outside and immediately become coated from hair to boots in dirt, unless the truck that sprayed sewage water to keep the dirt under control had been by, in which case he would walk through sewage-laden goop, and say it. He would go past the blast walls, the sandbags, the bunkers, the aid station where the wounded from other battalions were treated, the annex where they assembled the dead, and say it. ...

~David Finkel, The Good Soldiers

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of the noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

~Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities
Next Time, Stop the Freaking Race
Rick Reilly

There's a man buried in your kitchen.

He's right in that stack of newspapers there, about three weeks down, a headline one day, a one-graph follow-up the next, a nobody since.

His name is Ken Fox. He went to a race at Michigan Speedway on July 26 and was torn in half by a tire that flew into the stands, and they didn't even stop the freaking race. Now he's just part of a stat that sportswriters will fish out the next time a racing fan dies because he sat in the wrong seat—four fan deaths in the last 11 years, they can write now. So the CART circuit moved on to the all-important Miller Lite 200 in Lexington, Ohio, last week, where....

But wait just a second.

Ken Fox deserves one minute before we forget him. Ken Fox was somebody. He was 38, with a seven-year-old son, Christopher, who walked by his casket and left a little note with big sloppy letters. I love you, Daddy.

Ken Fox had a best friend, Steve Dawson, who can't eat now and can't sleep and can't forget about the day he went to a car race and everybody sitting around him left in body bags. Ken and Steve, from Lansing, Mich., worked together as drill instructors at a boot camp for first-time felons. They commuted to work together, bowled together, hashed out their divorces together. And they went to car races together. Steve had four tickets to the U.S. 500, and Steve's dad was too tired from working all night and Ken's brother had to study and Steve's fiance couldn't go, either, and thank god. But Steve and Ken went, and they were damn good seats, too, ninth row, fourth turn. Damn good seats.

They were having a blast. Ken was whooping for Michael Andretti to win, and it was a gorgeous day. Then, on Lap 175, Steve thought he saw something black out of the corner of his eye, and he ducked. When he turned back around, he saw that Ken was dead, and the woman just in front of Steve, Sheryl Laster, was dead, and, within the minute, the friend she was with, Mike Tautkus, was dead. "I don't know why I'm alive," Steve says. "I don't know if it was luck or fate or what. I've thought, Did Ken save my life? And I don't know that either. I don't know anything."

They build these race cars to explode on impact because it takes G forces away from the driver, makes it safer for him. But how many engineers are worrying about making guys like Ken Fox safer?

And they didn't even stop the freaking race. Race officials yellow-flagged it as a safety crew cleared the fourth-turn stands, but they left Ken and Sheryl and Mike lying there, covered by blankets, as the cheers started up again and the drivers went flying by again at 200 mph. Congratulations, Greg Moore, you just won the world's fastest funeral procession.
Steve hasn't been able to go back to work, and he's in crisis therapy, and there's a replay in his head that won't shut off. But he's figured out one thing. "Everybody wants to ask me about the blood and how the bodies were twisted, but all I want to do is tell them about Ken," he says. "I just want people to know that Ken was a great guy, a fun-loving, moral, stand-up guy. Everybody seems to be going on like none of this makes a difference. Well, I think it should."

You wonder if it does for Adrian Fernandez. The CART publicity sheets say he's having the best year of his life, ranked fourth in the points standings. But the sheets don't mention how he lost control of his car on the fourth turn that day and smashed the wall, sending his right front tire spinning up and over the 15-foot-high fence and through Christopher Fox's dad.

Three people are dead, and all Fernandez has done is send flowers. He hasn't visited or spoken with the victims' families, and all he has said since the day of the race is, "No comment." The CART people say he was a brave guy to climb back behind the wheel and win on Sunday in Ohio, but he hasn't had the guts yet to look into the eyes of the mothers and the kids.

Yeah, racing and sports and the world spin on at 9,000 rpm. Someday maybe Adrian Fernandez will figure he owes somebody a call. And someday maybe Steve Dawson will be fine, except for an empty seat next to him in the car and a chill that won't go away and the memory of the number of the seat Ken Fox took just ahead of him that gorgeous summer day.

Thirteen.
I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster. It was just after dark. A blustery March wind whipped the steam coming out of the manholes, and people hurried along the sidewalks with their collars turned up. I was stuck in traffic two blocks from the party where I was heading.

Mom stood fifteen feet away. She had tied rags around her shoulders to keep out the spring chill and was picking through the trash while her dog, a black-and-white terrier mix, played at her feet. Mom’s gestures were all familiar—the way she tilted her head and thrust out her lower lip when studying items of potential value that she’d hoisted out of the Dumpster, the way her eyes widened with childish glee when she found something she liked. Her long hair was streaked with gray, tangled and matted, and her eyes had sunk deep into their sockets, but still she reminded me of the mom she’d been when I was a kid, swan-diving off cliffs and painting in the desert and reading Shakespeare aloud. Her cheekbones were still high and strong, but the skin was parched and ruddy from all those winters and summers exposed to the elements. To the people walking by, she probably looked like any of the thousands of homeless people in New York City.

It had been months since I laid eyes on Mom, and when she looked up, I was overcome with panic that she’d see me and call out my name, and that someone on the way to the same party would spot us together and Mom would introduce herself and my secret would be out.

I slid down in the seat and asked the driver to turn around and take me home to Park Avenue.

The taxi pulled up in front of my building, the doorman held the door for me, and the elevator man took me up to my floor. My husband was working late, as he did most nights, and the apartment was silent except for the click of my heels on the polished wood floor. I was still rattled from seeing Mom, the unexpectedness of coming across her, the
She started talking about Picasso. She'd seen a retrospective of his work and decided he was hugely overrated. All the cubist stuff was gimmicky, as far as she was concerned. He hadn't really done anything worthwhile after his Rose Period.

"I'm worried about you," I said. "Tell me what I can do to help."

Her smile faded. "What makes you think I need your help?"

"I'm not rich," I said. "But I have some money. Tell me what it is you need."

She thought for a moment. "I could use an electrolysis treatment."

"Be serious."

"I am serious. If a woman looks good, she feels good."

"Come on, Mom." I felt my shoulders tightening up, the way they invariably did during these conversations. "I'm talking about something that could help you change your life, make it better."

"You want to help me change my life?" Mom asked. "I'm fine. You're the one who needs help. Your values are all confused."

"Mom, I saw you picking through trash in the East Village a few days ago."

"Well, people in this country are too wasteful. It's my way of recycling." She took a bite of her Seafood Delight. "Why didn't you say hello?"

"I was too ashamed, Mom. I hid."

Mom pointed her chopsticks at me. "You see?" she said. "Right there. That's exactly what I'm saying. You're way too easily embarrassed. Your father and I are who we are. Accept it."

"And what am I supposed to tell people about my parents?"

"Just tell the truth," Mom said. "That's simple enough."
Holding on Tight to All That is Common in Our Core
Penny Kittle, California English, winter 2013

This weekend my students have been emailing me drafts of personal essays on consumerism, how tourists disrespect wait staff, relationships, the after life, and so many other things they think and believe. They’ve told stories, they’ve argued, and they’ve provided important facts and information to clarify their ideas while following a journey of thought. To prepare to write we read essays from the This I Believe project and the best editorials I have collected.

Tomorrow I will drive through new snow in this mountain town to greet them at the door. Class will start with book talks, time to read, and conferences with individual kids about their books. We’ll read “A Prayer Among Friends” by John Daniel, our poem of the day, and then write freely in notebooks. We’ll spend a few moments rereading and listening to our writing, revising words and tuning sentences, deleting redundancies: the messy work that tightens meaning and clarifies thought. I’ll show them how I wrote this piece you are now reading—my struggle to find a starting place in my notebook, the revising of my thinking that haunted me all day and onto the ice rink during our curling match Saturday night. The disarray of my first draft, the jumble of the second, and the clarity I’m finding in a third. They may not mentor themselves to my moves as a writer, but they will see me in the struggle they are in. They’ll gather in writing groups to share their drafts, solicit feedback, and then get back to independent work. Eighty minutes can disappear before any of us are ready.

There is so little time and so much to teach.

But this is also the week before the holiday break, and new snow means my skiers may choose powder over English class. There is the usual run of flu and colds keeping some home, plus three students recovering from concussions (one hockey, one skiing, one snowboarding) and band members released to practice for the holiday concert. There are students missing parents and grandparents they lost just this fall, and two girls have lost their homes (one foreclosure, one fire.) Amidst all of the turmoil of teenage life, I work to create a space where they will grow as readers and writers.

My workshop classroom represents what I believe deeply about empowering students to read and write with facility and passion. The Common Core State Standards will not change this. Standards will not change my knowledge base or how I teach from that place. Of course my students need to read texts of increasing complexity and learn to read informational texts that will open up paths of study in psychology or politics or paranormal activity. Close, complex reading has always been a goal of mine. Of course my students should write well in a variety of forms and understand how text types blend. At our core we teachers will align our instruction to move students forward, as we always have. I will hold tightly to the best ways I know how to do that.

Sometimes I think we are arguing about the wrong things—not what they are reading or the forms they’re writing in—but volume, stamina, vision, pleasure, confidence, and power. I reach for engagement and the desire to express all they know, all they’ve lived, and all they wonder about the world. I want my students to understand a process that will work on any text they need to read or write in the future. I want
them to know the power of their words on the page and seek a connection with readers. As English teachers we will continue to trust in what we know, and seek ways to fill the gaps of what we don’t. We will seek ways to inspire our students to want more literature, more poetry, and more words that dance in images on the page.

As I gather my thinking in the quiet spaces between days spent teaching, I plan for four things because I know they provide the most likely path to the challenging bar of these standards.

**One.** Students will build an individual reading life of challenge, whim, curiosity, and hunger. This reading life is different than “proficiency” and “complexity.” It is larger—it contains multitudes. It is Tolstoy and Alexie and Shakespeare and shelves of young adult literature consumed like the last deep breath you take before a dive, because it is real life to these teenagers and when books reach them, they reach for books. My students are expected to read 25 or more books independently this year and I nurture that mission through my daily work conferring with readers and matching them to books. I press them to read more. Why put this time into independent reading? Because there must be a balance between literature we choose for students and reading they choose for themselves. This is how all readers build idiosyncratic and lasting reading lives. I listened to a writing hero of mine, Sherman Alexie, speak in Las Vegas at the NCTE conference last month. Alexie reflected on the letters he receives from teenagers who say *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* is the first book they’ve ever read. He told us, “This kid has been dealt such a disservice if he’s never found a book before mine.” His words are painfully true. Too many high school students come to me every year having never read a book.

Challenging expectations for independent reading are also preparation for the volume of reading in college. Students need to build muscles in high school. They must read much more than the literature we assign for close reading; they need a regular reading habit. As Paul Tough noted in *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character,* “It has become clear that the United States does not so much have a problem of limited and unequal college access; it has a problem of limited and unequal college completion. Among the 34 member countries of the organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, the U.S. still ranks a respectable eighth in college enrollment rate. But in college completion—the percentage of entering college freshmen who go on to graduate—the U.S. ranks second to last, ahead of only Italy. Not long ago, the U.S. led the world in producing college graduates; now it leads the world in producing college dropouts.” True, some students drop out of college because of the enormous cost, but others are simply not prepared well enough for the independent reading ahead of them. We can and must change that.

**Two.** My students will come to believe they are part of a club (*The Literacy Club,* Frank Smith) where people write with a sense of craft guiding them. We will practice this writing and rereading to sharpen images and ideas in our notebooks. Notebook work is not about particular prompts or poems, but rather the regular, purposeful, sustained engagement with words and ideas, crafting towards a vision you can’t quite
name yet, but will find as you write. It is about perseverance. Erica Jong said, “The hardest part is believing in yourself at the notebook stage. It is like believing in dreams in the morning.” We practice believing every day in my room.

I trust in notebooks because they lead students to write freely what they didn’t know they knew—the surprise of words on the page. My students find their voices in free writing. Sam, a tenth grader, wrote last week:

*When you pull the trigger on an animal you can’t undo that bullet. Life will leave, but the body stays unchanged, still seeming alive, but not moving or blinking. Nothing. They are still as warm and lifelike as the moment before, but that leaves.

It is quick and clean, but the animals are so resilient they cling to the roots of life until they can no longer hold on. When the last ounce of life leaves the mind and body of the creature you feel such a connection to it, something different than a love connection, far deeper. It feels a part of you. You’ve gained knowledge of its life story. You have now written a part of the story, the end of its story. This animal is gone that fast and you realize it could be the same with you.*

You might ask, what is this writing for? I’m not sure Sam knows yet, but even if it never finds a place in formal writing, he has found words for what he knows. As Anne Lamott said, “I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe.”

**Three.** Students will be encouraged to take risks in form, in style, and in craft. I want students to trust their way of seeing the world and to trust that they can organize their thinking in effective ways. I want students to live at the edge of what they can do in reading and writing. I want them to see the growth they are making by collecting writing in a portfolio. Time to read and write will be a daily, predictable routine in my room so that students can live like readers and writers, making choices and gathering skills and momentum as learners.

At the center of workshop teaching is conferring. Conferences rest on listening. I must show each one that I believe all students are competent and capable. They hear this in the language I use to talk about their writing and in in the way I listen to them and those they sit beside. The core of what we believe shows up in unscripted moments like conferences. We must confer with students because, as Katie Wood Ray said, “If you’re not conferring, you’re missing out on one of the great joys in teaching.”

**Four.** My students will have access to a wide range of mentors from whom they can learn about writing: professional writers, their peers in class, other student writers, and their teacher. This week we studied two essays by Leonard Pitts, Jr., and next week we’ll study the writing of George Orwell and Martin Luther King, Jr. They also read two pieces by former students of mine, one on learning the value of composting on her family’s farm and the other on the rise of gun violence in our country. I flood them with possibilities. Vision for craft comes from the study of craft.
I will share my own struggle to write a cohesive, thoughtful essay as a bridge for their process in writing. I write beside them because modeling what we are teaching is simply good practice. It is important for students to watch how writers work: to watch a teacher struggle to improve a sentence or tighten the clarity of a paragraph. They can mentor themselves to my decision making if it helps them.

I will teach from my core, from my heart this year and next. I will teach from my beliefs about learning and teenagers and what I know as a writer and reader. I will struggle to balance my idealism with pragmatism. I will listen to teachers that lead me through their own reflections: on twitter, in blog postings, and in the professional books I read and reread. Who we are and who we are with children will not change because of the Common Core State Standards.

English poet Ted Hughes said, “And the only thing people regret is that they didn’t live boldly enough, didn’t invest enough heart, didn’t love enough.” Teach boldly, my friends. Invest your heart in the students before you. We can lead students to enter the world as thoughtful, empowered, and fearless readers and writers. It is what English teachers are called to do.

Works Cited:


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