

Expository (Informational/Explanatory) writing unit

Penny Kittle, *with thanks to Kelly Gallagher for *Write Like This*

How do we lead students to own the qualities of strong expository writing?

- **Study forms** that will lead to success for all students (satire; research words, favorite teams, places, etc.; explain how an object of yours reveals who you are; explain your reading life; unwritten rules; be the expert: how something works; definitions; how to survive ____; you should know biographies)
- **Students who choose** their passions write better, pay more attention to revision
- **Define the audience** who will read their work
- **“Several laps around the track”** allow students to practice their skills, then repeat what they’ve learned and improve, then begin to move beyond form to larger understandings of the qualities of informative writing (repetition = retention.) During one unit of study in this form, students might create 3-4 texts that represent different forms, but the similar understandings about the qualities of explanatory writing: they lead with information, they seek a connection with a reader, they establish the author’s credibility, they are thorough, deliver most important information
- **Frequently study texts** and notice qualities, list, & evaluate during the unit, adding to class understandings & the practice of analytical reading
- **Create anchor charts** of understandings for your classroom that remain in place throughout the unit—anyone should be able to walk into your classroom and know what you’re studying and how today connects to yesterday & tomorrow
- **Name the craft that you see in good writing that explains:** the vivid details that define a problem or explain something’s worth; the attention to word choice; the voice of an authority that carries a piece and makes readers listen, shows the writer has done his research; intentional word choice that makes complex things easier to understand
- **Frame the year of study** for students, showing how qualities of writing and skills and forms are related to each other & how students will gather skills and larger understandings

Quick Writes:

- Use poetry that explains or informs—short texts, big messages—because poetry reinforces the idea that there are many forms of writing that explain and inform an audience = a bigger picture of the genre and the way all writing is connected
- List parts of the whole in notebooks, connect the parts in unusual or surprising ways
- Quickly write in imitation of a mentor text form (“Six Things You Should Know About” from *ESPN* magazine); day two take one element of the quick write and expand it or refine it, showing how the rethinking of writing often improves it
- Quick writing is effective for partners; collaborative writing is a powerful teaching tool (what every driver needs to know; why I’m not going to college in September, etc.)
- Revise quick writing “make it better” as daily practice in rereading & attention to craft

Revision focus:

- Reread your writing and find: your best phrases, lines; the line that is the heart of what you're trying to say; a place where you can make it better writing; a place where you can add information to strengthen the idea; a place where you have more to say; then write just from that place...
- Post best sentences, crafty word choice, celebrate small victories
- Pay attention to the power of voice: what exactly makes you want to keep reading?
- Where can you insert humor? Laughing at ignorance is easier than be condemned by it and you know more than your readers about this topic—invite them in

Sentence Study (can be chosen from mentor texts in unit):

- This work is ideal for partners—collaborative writing is one of 11 best strategies for teaching adolescents writing skills (*Writing Next*)
- Practice skills like creative ways to list several elements of your topic, how to combine ideas, how to break down a complex idea into parts
- Mentor students to samples from texts you study together during this unit: zoom in on one sentence & practice together
 - Example: sentences that group information
 - “**Dash and description**” (zooms in on details that *show* (a narrative skill that is often used in argument); the dash creates emphasis)
 - I stared at my father’s photograph—his thin face stern, lips latched tight, his eyes peering permanently to the right. ~Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks*.
 - I studied my new printer—the instruction manual written by a scientist, the confusing menus and buttons, the possibility of failure to print lit up on its control panel.
- Strong opening and closing lines—how writers of story often bring the piece full circle through images or ideas that repeat in the piece
- Study frames for essays (images, ideas, questions)
- Transition phrases and sentences: how does a writer move the reader to an understanding of this topic or concept?

Mentor Texts:

- It makes a difference when a student (or the entire class) chooses a text as a *mentor*—makes the deliberate decision to mentor their writing to the model
- Choose anchor texts for whole class to *read closely together* that are good models of the informational texts or letters you want students to write: consider *Letters from a Nut*
- Mix published author texts with grade level strong student texts
- Your process in writing an essay to explain or inform, including your rough draft (even unfinished) can be an anchor text for the class to study, best if created recently
- Use storyboarding to help students think flexibly about organization of informative writing: seek unusual publications on the web
- Consider the study one author’s work through several texts (Malcolm Gladwell “Trial by Fire” or other *New Yorker* pieces)

- Teach students how to annotate what they see in a text by showing them how you annotate the craft you see as you read
- Read, analyze (study), write and share together—your model is critical at every stage of the process

Goals for collaborative writing or independent practice:

- When in the unit will students be ready for independent/collaborative work time? (How much time do you anticipate students need for finding topics?)
- How many days per week/minutes per day for this writing time?
- What are your exit tickets or other expectations for productivity?
- Structure and manage individual & small group conferences so you can teach into the intentions of individual students—your most powerful teaching opportunity
- Define your expectations for peer work, lead students in this work—perhaps all will publish imitation sentences on the white board, perhaps students will meet in groups to discuss drafts or write together

Assessment opportunities:

- Quick writes/notebook grades = good faith effort to write & revise
 - Evidence of revision, sentence imitations, write the entire time to build stamina
- Annotations on a mentor text can highlight particular understandings
- Collaborative work on sentence imitation, revision, or annotation of texts
- Exit slips at the end of class to clarify learning: one sentence to show...
- Writing conferences (teacher or peer) are assessment opportunities, keep records
- For YOU: the unit plan; which mentor texts were successful; which quick write invitations produced greatest engagement; the productivity of workshop time

Final product (last draft) evaluation:

- Will you grade content, process, and mechanics separately?
- Will particular focus skills be graded with more weight than others?
- Will you use a rubric or a list of qualities to define expectations?
- *Optional* but important student self-assessment questions:
 - How did you find your topic? How did you sustain interest in it? (Students should name what they've learned about process)
 - What did you learn from a mentor text that helped you write with more purpose and skill? (Students will transfer process of mentoring to writers)
 - How did conferences (teacher, peer) assist in your development as a writer? (Excellent opportunity for teacher feedback & reflection)
 - Discuss your drafting and revision process. (Students highlight revisions)
 - Considering the qualities of strong narrative writing that we discussed in class, how would you evaluate this piece of your writing? (Reflection on skill)
 - If you had weeks more to spend working on this piece, how would you improve it? (Writing is not finished, it's just due.)

*Everything that needs to be said has already been said.
But since no one was listening, everything must be said again.*

~Andre Gilde