

LANGUAGE ARTS

A SHOEBOX OR (PAPER BAG) BIOGRAPHY

GRADES: K-2

I always begin the new year by sharing items from my “Shoebox Biography”. After I model this for the first graders, I send home a description of this activity for my students to complete for their first homework assignment. Believe me, NOT ONE of my first graders loses or forgets to bring this homework.

MATERIALS:

- a paper bag or shoebox
- personal items from home that will give the class more information about who they are and what they like to do. Examples are photographs of family or pets, a sample of something they collect (stickers, baseball cards, coins,)
- an original piece of artwork
- cd or tape of favorite music
- a copy of a favorite story
- a small stuffed animal

METHOD:

1. The key is that each item has to be thought out, represent something about the presenting students, and has to be able to fit in the shoebox or paper bag. A

- great way to get to know each other.
2. We have even done graphing activities about items brought.
 3. I suggest that students bring no more than 5 or 6 items.

Submitted by,

DAWN SMITH
BOWEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
CINCINNATI, OH
dawnasmith@insightbb.com

LETTER WRITING PRACTICE

GRADES: 4-8

Get the kids writing early in the school year and welcome them each individually. Write a personal letter to your incoming students. This can set the stage for writers' workshop, as well as create a welcoming environment.

METHOD:

- Write a personal letter to the students using the following friendly letter format:
 - Introductory Paragraph: Who I am, how long I've taught, and a little about my family and where I live.

- Body Paragraph: Some of the things I did over the summer.
- Second Body Paragraph: A few of the things we will be doing in class. Closing Paragraph: Welcome to the class and hopes for a good year together.
- Give each child a typed (most students have trouble reading cursive) copy of your letter, with no written directions or nagging about letter format, or other writing conventions. Simply tell the students to write back to you in class.

NOTES:

- This rough draft is not to be “graded” in the traditional sense. Keep it as a sample of each student’s early in the year writing.
- Last year when I did this for the first time, I was thrilled with the way most of the kids responded. They naturally followed the format modeled, and there was no need to harp about quality, or length. They wanted to start off the year putting their best writing forward, just as I wanted to invite them into our classroom community.
- The project can also be adapted for anytime during the school year, i.e., after a vacation, feelings about the first couple months of school, etc.

- *submitted by*

PATRICIA BRAUN
ROOSEVELT MIDDLE SCHOOL
RIVER FOREST, IL
pbsed@kwom.com

THE EVILS OF BOOK REPORTS

GRADES 4-12

This is one of the most controversial lessons I'll ever write...but also one of the most important.

I never give book reports to my students. Never.

There are some basic premises to my position:

- A MAJOR GOAL OF MOST TEACHERS IS TO GET STUDENTS TO ENJOY READING.
- ALMOST EVERY TIME A BOOK IS ASSIGNED, THE STUDENTS ARE REQUIRED TO WRITE A REPORT
- STUDENTS HATE BOOK REPORTS
- STUDENTS ASSOCIATE BOOK REPORTS WITH READING
- STUDENTS DO NOT VOLUNTARILY READ

This may sound simplistic...and it is. But it's also basic psychology—the students associate a negative experience (reports) with an action (reading books), and therefore, hate the action!

Think about it...how often, when you assign a book, do the students immediately inquire whether or not they have to do a report! And when they find out that a report IS required, how excited are they to now read?

So how do we get the students to read? Or, as many teachers may ask, how do we check up on whether or not they are reading? Here are a number of random ideas:

- Require the students to keep a reading book with them at all times, as part of their supplies. They read the book during their free time. When a book is easily accessible, they will naturally read.
- Assign genres of books as usual. However, instead of a report to check up on them, sit down and talk to the

student, one-on-one. It's easy—you'll get all of the information you need, and you'll also develop a closer relationship with the student. This one-on-one only has to take a few minutes and can occur over a couple of weeks, during students' work time.

- Participate in book clubs (i.e. Scholastic, Troll). The students are picking their own books, and paying for them, and therefore, are more apt to read them.
- Start a classroom "card catalogue". After each student reads a book, he/she makes a card with a short summary for other students in the class to read. This is an easy way to check on the students reading!
- If you MUST give a project, use a type of book "project"—anything but a "written report". This can be a diorama, book poster, book cover, etc.

I have found that my students continuously read. They are always purchasing book club books, and their parents often relate back to me that the students get upset because they don't have enough time to read (when I give them too much homework). Reading has become a pleasurable experience—not one associated with a dreaded "book report"!

submitted by

DR. SCOTT MANDEL

PACOIMA MIDDLE SCHOOL

LOS ANGELES, CA

mandel@pacificnet.net

LETTER WRITING PRACTICE

GRADES: 4-8

Get the kids writing early in the school year and welcome them each individually. Write a personal letter to your incoming students. This can set the stage for writers' workshop, as well as create a welcoming environment.

METHOD:

- Write a personal letter to the students using the following friendly letter format:
 - Introductory Paragraph: Who I am, how long I've taught, and a little about my family and where I live.
 - Body Paragraph: Some of the things I did over the summer.
 - Second Body Paragraph: A few of the things we will be doing in class. Closing Paragraph: Welcome to the class and hopes for a good year together.
- Give each child a typed (most students have trouble reading cursive) copy of your letter, with no written directions or nagging about letter format, or other writing conventions. Simply tell the students to write back to you in class.

NOTES:

- This rough draft is not to be "graded" in the traditional sense. Keep it as a sample of each student's early in the year writing.
- Last year when I did this for the first time, I was thrilled with the way most of the kids responded. They naturally followed the format modeled, and there was no need to harp about quality, or length. They wanted to start off the year putting their best writing forward, just as I wanted to invite them into our classroom community.
- The project can also be adapted for anytime during the

school year, i.e., after a vacation, feelings about the first couple months of school, etc.

submitted by

PATRICIA BRAUN

ROOSEVELT MIDDLE SCHOOL

RIVER FOREST, IL

pbsed@kwom.com

THE SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA CENTER: AN UNDER-UTILIZED RESOURCE

GRADES: K-12

Editor's note: One of the most valuable, and underused, resources in the school is the school "library", or "media center" as the more modern ones are now called. Often teachers are totally unfamiliar with the resources available to them on-site "assuming" that the library is out-dated with few relevant materials. This is not really a "lesson" per se, but an introduction to the "Media Center Concept" by one of the top Library Media Teachers in Los Angeles. Hopefully you can share this with others on your staff. SM

A school's Library Media Center is the teacher's dream for information resources, higher-level learning, technological advances, academic stimulation, and pleasurable reading pursuits. Yet, it is often the last place that a teacher may think of when planning his/her daily lessons or seeking new resources and ideas. The Library Media Center (LMC) can put new life into old lessons and motivate students if a teacher

knows how to tap into its resources and incorporate it into the classroom curriculum.

The LMC is unique from other libraries. It is specifically designed to support the curriculum and needs of the school it is located at. Its materials, then, reflect the characteristics of the student population and faculty, including its strengths and weaknesses.

A Librarian, or Library Media Teacher (LMT) is always ready and willing to help out with classroom projects. You will find that they are open to new ideas and new methods of teaching. Remember, that in most cases, they are TEACHERS too! They especially would like to work as a team with their school's teachers. They are more than happy to collaborate on preparing new lessons and projects—helping teachers to create the project, inject new ideas, and devise the plan for executing the project. Any LMT worth their salary would also be willing to divide the work and responsibilities for teaching students. For instance, the classroom teacher would provide the lessons that give the background information and instructions required by the students. The LMT would give the lessons on how to find the information and use the resources needed, such as the Reader's Guide, the Social Issues Resources folders, or computer reference sources. They can also point out reference sources that no one may have thought of using. Of course, they are always available to help students individually, whether it's during class time, lunch time, or after school. An LMT is also willing to display the finished products. They could put the projects in a display case, post them on the walls, or display them on a table.

Here are some quick, everyday examples of the curricular help an LMT can provide:

Need a new method to teach that lesson that became old hat ten years ago? Try picking your LMT's brain. They probably have some new ideas worth looking into.

Need something to occupy your students during homeroom? Or an opening activity for class? Try a Sustained Silent Reading Time. Of course, your LMT could help you with reading materials and give you suggestions about how to implement it.

Lamenting over low reading scores? Ask your LMT to start a reading program for your students. Such a project is right up their alley. They can help set up an incentive program that will stimulate students to crack those books open and read—and enjoy it, too!

LMT's have connections with other libraries and librarians both in their school's neighborhood as well as specialty libraries that may fill unique needs. So go to them with your requests. Chances are that they may know just where to find what you're looking for. An LMT also keeps abreast of new curriculum standards, new technologies, and new resources in the community. So they can help with developing new curricula as well as new ways of motivating students—and they can be a great ally in the new technology age.

So take advantage of your Library Media Center and your Library Media Teacher. They have a lot to offer!

submitted by

CYNTHIA WONG

PACOIMA MIDDLE SCHOOL

LOS ANGELES, CA

**GETTING YOUR STUDENTS PREPARED FOR
THE S.A.T.: VERBAL VOCABULARY**

GRADES 8-11

As much as we teach our students in Language Arts, as prepared as we feel our high schoolers are for college, it is unfortunate that their admission (and often grant eligibility) is often based solely on their score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Whereas the S.A.T. math section can be successfully completed by any student who passed 9th grade math with at least a “B”, the same is not true for the Verbal section. For, you see, the S.A.T. Verbal section is based on vocabulary not used, or even recognized, by many high school English teachers!

Therefore, what can we do to enhance our students chances on the S.A.T., and subsequently, their chances for admission into a good college? A Spelling/Vocabulary program for 8th-11th graders will greatly help their S.A.T. knowledge and subsequent score.

The components of such a program are as follows:

1. Get ahold of an S.A.T. preparation book. These regularly have a “Frequently Used Words on the S.A.T.” section.
2. Use these words as your spelling/vocabulary list (10-20 words a week).
3. Have the students write these words on flashcards—word on one side, definition on the reverse.
4. Answer their expected hesitation on making flash cards the following ways:
 - Point out that they will learn the material more efficiently (give examples).
 - More importantly, flash cards can be saved for a couple of years, and then brought out to use as a review the month before they take the actual S.A.T.!
5. As extra motivation, each week give a Spelling/Vocabulary test.

Schools that have predetermined vocabulary lists can easily divide the words up among the appropriate grades so as to not duplicate efforts. The end result: **the students S.A.T. verbal scores will dramatically rise in your school, as the students become more prepared than if they had studied on their own!**

submitted by

DR. SCOTT MANDEL

PACOIMA MIDDLE SCHOOL

LOS ANGELES, CA

mandel@pacificnet.net
