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# TEACHING TIPS

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**Beth Gulley, Column Editor**

Welcome to the inaugural Teaching Tips column in *Kansas English*. This is a place where innovative educators from all levels of instruction may share brief (250-500 word) teaching strategies. We hope readers will draw inspiration from the ideas presented here, adapt them, and later share their own suggestions for meaningful classroom activities.

This column is inspired by Atul Gawande's book *Better*, in which he makes five suggestions for being a positive deviant. Among the suggestions is to write something no matter how brief. In fact, Gawande lauds the publication of "fragments" of science. He contends, "by soliciting modest contributions from the many, we have produced a store of collective know-how with far greater power than any individual could have achieved" (Gawande, 2007, pp. 255-256). The same could be said for snapshots of what works well inside classrooms. By soliciting brief pieces, we hope to encourage more teachers to write and share their teaching highlights with others. In this way, we hope to add to the collective understanding of what happens in classrooms today.

In this column, the four pieces point to ways teachers can foster student engagement and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Amanda Preston highlights a partnership between elementary school students who write stories and a high school drama class that turns the stories into plays they bring back and perform for the elementary school. April Pameticky shares how she uses sticky notes to foster authentic student discussions. Maureen Fitzpatrick borrows a mode of inquiry from botany to engage literature students in story worlds. Finally, Shannon Carriger prompts students to propose their own projects and generate their own rubrics.

In the next column, we hope to include even more excellent teaching snippets. We hope, dear reader, that you will consider contributing your great ideas here as well.

## **Reference**

Gawande, A. (2007). *Better: A surgeon's notes on performance*. Picador.

## Teaching Tip: Bring Stories to Life on Stage

### Amanda Preston

Wolf Creek Elementary, Spring Hill, Kansas

I imagine that almost every author dreams of the day when their writing comes alive as a published text. How exciting it must be to see the carefully considered words flow across the page, for a reader to bring the story into reality! It's like magic! This same magical excitement proves true for student authors. Kids love creating stories and imagining them come to life. Here is an example of how some elementary students had the opportunity to bring their stories off the page and right onto center stage!

Fourth and fifth grade students participated in an optional writing contest. Students worked for a couple of months developing a story, conferencing with a teacher to make improvements, and creating a final draft. Once completed, judges scored the stories based on a rubric. This was a pretty typical student writing contest.

But, the winning prize was very different. After the judges had finished scoring, the top stories were sent over to the drama department at the local high school. Now, these high school thespians took the stories and turned each of them into a play. Each play was assigned a senior student to be the director. The director and the rest of the cast worked to develop the characters, plan the blocking, create the costumes, and more. They rehearsed for a few weeks. Then, they brought their plays to the elementary school to perform in front of students.

This was the authors' moment in the spotlight! They were introduced before their plays began. They had a moment to explain how they got the idea for their stories and what it was like to move through the writing process. Then, the actors performed the plays. Afterwards, the authors reflected on whether or not the plays stayed true to what they had imagined. They shared what it felt like to see their stories come to life—literally!

This event really brought excitement to the writing process. Students were enthralled by seeing a peer's story come to life. It inspired them to join the contest the following year, to perhaps see their story up on stage. It also created an amazing partnership between the elementary students and the high school drama department. It proved that just like in the publishing world, it takes many hands to bring an author's story to life! And the end result was magical!

### Author Biography

Amanda Preston is an elementary school librarian in Spring Hill, Kansas, and a member of the Flint Hills Writing Project. She enjoys combining her love of books and writing together to inspire her students. She can be reached at [prestona@usd230.org](mailto:prestona@usd230.org).

## Teaching Tip: Use Sticky-Notes to Generate Better Inquiry for Better Class Discussions

**April Pameticky**

Wichita East High School, Wichita, Kansas

When I was a first-year teacher, I relied heavily on pre-generated questions, either directly from the curriculum or from study guides. I wanted the students to have quality conversations and class discussions, but I didn't trust myself to get students where I wanted them to go without the assistance of well-written questions. I spent a great deal of time categorizing questions as text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text; or determining that some questions weren't worth asking because they were only Costa's Level 1 (RIGHT THERE) questions.

I often found myself in painfully silent rooms as students tried to digest what my question was asking. I would even ask leading questions with sentence stem starters ... assuming that the fill-in-the-blank answer was obvious.

It wasn't obvious.

The painful silence had kids forcefully staring down or wincing when they met my gaze.

I was making some very important errors:

- 1) I assumed if they didn't answer the question, they didn't understand the question.
- 2) I assumed that my interpretation OR the most common interpretation was the only VALID interpretation of the story.
- 3) I assumed that my students didn't understand basic elements of the story.
- 4) I assumed that if they didn't *ask* any questions, they didn't *have* any questions.

I instituted a practice when I taught middle school that has translated very nicely to my high school classroom. All students get a sticky note and can ask *any* question they want about the text. All students HAVE to generate a question—but I don't tell them it has to be a certain level or a certain type. At this stage, I'm not teaching levels of inquiry, although later that might be an additional element. It's a ticket out at the bell or a transition activity to hang the sticky-note.

I then take those questions and curate them. Questions that directly relate to some part of the plot that have confused readers get addressed whole-class. How can we go deep if we still have questions related to *who* did *what*? Then those questions that do dig deeper, that do bring up some interesting elements, those are brought to the discussion where I step back (I do Socratic Circles, World Café Rotations, Padlet Discussions, etc.). I have found that if I let my students guide our discussions, there is far more buy-in and participation. Students get excited to hear their questions. Some will verbally claim them; "That's mine!" Others will shyly come up later and thank me for using their questions.

I can do a number of informal assessments and checks-for-understanding this way. The results have meant validating student thinking and interpretations of things. It has also meant that I've broadened my own understandings of stories. I've allowed students to challenge stories and to learn to value the questioning process.

### Author Biography

April Pameticky lives and works in Wichita, Kansas. When not busy raising two children with her husband, she's grading papers for her high school students, or upon that rare occasion, writing a line or two of poetry. She can be reached at [apameticky@usd259.net](mailto:apameticky@usd259.net).

## Teaching Tip: Implement INIWIRMO Journals

**Maureen Fitzpatrick**

Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas

With our college largely online in the fall of 2020, one of our suddenly lab-less botany professors sent his students into their yards and neighborhoods for field work. Their mission was to find and journal about the plants around them using a journaling style popular in nature studies programs—INIWIRMO journaling. INIWIRMO—an acronym for *I notice, I wonder, It reminds me of*—engages observers in close examination of their natural “texts” and encourages curiosity. It asks them to look closely at or even to sketch out important details, to speculate on the meaning or significance of what they noticed, and finally to make a connection between their specimen and the wider world. As my colleague showed us sample pages from his students’ nature journals, I began revising my plans for a course on storyworld literature I was teaching that term. My colleague’s students had taken INIWIRMO journals into their back yard; mine would take them to Middle Earth.

The results were amazing. When students posted their INIWIRMO journals to discussion boards after each assigned reading, these three prompts set off an explosion of conversation. Each of the students had noticed something different, so the discussions were wide-ranging. Each of the students’ wonderings raised distinct ideas about character motivations or the story’s next chapter that engaged their classmates. Each of the personal associations—whether the student had been reminded of a personal event or another story they had read or seen—linked them to classmates with similar experiences and deepened their connection to the text.

The prompts were simple for students to grasp, and the responses were engaging to read; indeed, the INIWIRMO journals had worked so well in the literature class, I looked at my composition classes for readings students had struggled to engage with. In composition section for healthcare-related professions, students had been struggling to connect to many of the essays in *Disability/ Visibility*, a collection of first-person writings about living with disabilities. The essays are compelling but outside of many of the students’ experience—personal essays on being deaf inside the prison system, reflections on the challenges of designing clothing for clients with a variety of disabilities, the story of the moment one woman stopped looking for a cure for a painful condition. I had assigned the students to select an essay from the book and expand on the theme. I wanted to discourage students from selecting an essay based only on its title or length and encourage students to read multiple selections, yet I didn’t want to burden the students with writing multiple summaries of essays they were not actually interested in. Instead, I asked students to submit a INIWIRMO reflection on each of their three top contenders. The INIWIRMO entries were not only faster assignments for them to complete (and for me to grade), but the *wondering* and reflection on what it *reminded them of* engaged them in the materials in a way that lead them to further explorations of the essay’s theme.

### Author Biography

Maureen Fitzpatrick has taught English at Johnson County Community College since 1993. She teaches a variety of writing classes and the occasional literature course. She can be reached at [mfitzpat@jccc.edu](mailto:mfitzpat@jccc.edu).

## Teaching Tip: Try a Student Proposed Project and Rubric

**Shannon Carriger**

Gardner Edgerton High School

One common struggle in Language Arts classes is the buy-in necessary for a student to create meaningful work. Often a blanket prompt is offered on a singular topic—character development in *The Scarlet Letter* for instance—and then the teacher must grade up to a hundred essays on the same topic that may be, depending on the student’s level of buy in, less than inspired.

One way to mitigate this is to have students propose their own project and create their own rubric for a writing assignment. Make a choice bank listing six to ten skills you’ve been teaching and allow them to choose the three to five they’d like to have assessed. I always include editing as the non-negotiable criterion for all students. This is a reminder that work must be polished and complete to be considered for a grade.

In an advanced Creative Writing class, this worked well recently when students were working on projects in three different genres: poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Because they had the freedom to work in the genre of their choice, and because they planned and proposed their own projects, they had ownership over what was evaluated for a grade. For the first time in years, all projects were turned in on time, and the grades were higher on average due to the student sense of agency in the decision-making process around how the work was assessed.

### Author Biography

Shannon Carriger is a writer and career educator currently teaching at Gardner Edgerton High School. Her chapbook, *Deep Inside that Rounded World*, was published by Finishing Line Press in October 2020, and she blogs at [www.shannoncarriger.com](http://www.shannoncarriger.com). She makes her home in Ottawa, KS, with her poet-professor husband and their ever-evolving book and record collections. She can be reached at [skcarriger@gmail.com](mailto:skcarriger@gmail.com).



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