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# DIALOGUING WITH AND ABOUT TEXTS: USING DIALECTICAL JOURNALS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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## **Abstract**

Dialectical journals offer a structured approach for helping students engage more deeply with texts. Research demonstrates that this practice strengthens critical thinking and reading comprehension (Edwards, 1991), supports the development of analytical and reflective habits (Enabulele, 2011), and encourages students to consider multiple perspectives as they form independent interpretations (Kelly, 2021). This article examines the role of dialectical journals in the secondary English classroom and provides practical guidance for planning, modeling effective responses, and integrating technology to enhance the journaling process.

**Keywords:** writing, analytical journals, reader-response journals, reflective journals, dialectical journals, author craft

I still remember the silence that settled over the room when I asked my students to analyze an excerpt from *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel. Eyes wandered, pencils remained still, and the confusion in the room was unmistakable. As a ninth-grade teacher in 2008, that moment solidified a question I wrestled with daily: *How can I inspire students to craft thoughtful responses to literature?*

It soon dawned on me that many of my students struggled not only to understand the texts we read but also to engage with them critically and articulate their interpretations in writing. For this reason, I began to conduct research on writing strategies and discovered the dialectical journal. Research shows that this strategy has the potential to strengthen critical thinking and reading comprehension (Edwards, 1991), helps develop students' analytical and reflective habits (Enabulele, 2011), and even supports democratic learning by validating multiple perspectives and encouraging independent interpretation (Kelly, 2021).

With these benefits in mind, I implemented the dialectical journal in my classroom because I believed the strategy would support my students in “dialoguing with and about the texts” we read (Enabulele, 2011, p. 8), shifting them from passive to active readers. In the next section, I will outline the lesson planning steps I used to integrate the dialectical journal into classroom instruction.

## **Preparing for the Dialectical Journal Assignment**

The dialectical journal (see Appendix A) consists of three columns: (1) a selected quotation from the text, (2) the corresponding page number, and (3) the student's interpretation or analysis of the quote. In developing my lesson plan, I began by deconstructing the targeted learning standard to ensure clarity and focus. I identified the Tier 3, or domain-specific (McKeown et al., 2012),

vocabulary my students needed to master to meet the expectations of the standard. Table 1 demonstrates how my deconstruction of the standard guided my instructional focus and informed the specific literary devices I emphasized when completing the dialectical journal.

**Table 1:** Deconstructing a Standard

Standard	Knowledge and Skills	Genre	Verbs	Tier 3 Vocabulary
E1.6(C): Analyze non-linear plot development such as flashbacks, foreshadowing, subplots, parallel plot structures, and compare it to linear plot development (Texas Education Agency, 2017)	Comprehension of Literary/ Fiction texts	Fiction	Analyze Compare	Linear plot, Non-linear plot, Conflict, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Resolution, Subplots, Parallel Plot, Flashbacks, Foreshadowing

After identifying the Tier 3 vocabulary essential to the standard, I selected key passages in the text where my students would be prompted to *pause, reflect, and respond* in writing. At each of these strategic stopping points, I developed questions explicitly aligned with the identified Tier 3 vocabulary from the standard. In formulating these questions, I also considered how the standard was assessed on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR), since that was the state in which I was employed. It was critical to ensure that the questions reflected both the format and cognitive rigor of the state assessment. Table 2 outlines the process I used to design questions that guided my students’ dialectical journal responses.

**Table 2:** Planning Questions for the Dialectical Journal

Standard	Lesson Focus	Tier 3 Vocabulary	Objective	Dialectical Journal Questions
E1.6(C): Analyze non-linear plot development such as flashbacks, foreshadowing, subplots, parallel plot structures, and compare it to linear plot development (Texas Education Agency, 2017)	Conflict Linear Plot	External Conflict Internal Conflict Linear Plot	Students will be able to <i>analyze</i> how <b>internal</b> and <b>external conflicts</b> contribute to the linear progression of the plot.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In Chapter 5, how does Mr. Pignati's internal conflict on page 33 contribute to the linear progression of the plot?</li> <li>2. In Chapter 5, how does the external conflict between John and Lorraine contribute to the linear progression of the plot?</li> <li>3. In Chapter 5, how does Mr. Pignati's internal conflict on page 37 contribute to the linear progression of the plot?</li> <li>4. In Chapter 6, what is one internal conflict Lorraine faces, and how does the conflict contribute to the linear progression of the plot?</li> </ol>

*Note.* The dialectical questions in the table are based on the text: *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel.

### The Dialectical Journal in Practice

I began the dialectical journal process by supporting my students in identifying a meaningful or thought-provoking passage for closer examination. Early on, my students struggled to select quotations that offered sufficient depth for critical analysis, so I demonstrated the process of identifying significant textual excerpts that could serve as a basis for richer discussion. To select quotes, I identified a literary device that was the focus for the journal (i.e., internal conflict, linear plot, figurative language, or point of view). Aligning the dialectical journal to specific literary devices helped establish a clear purpose for reading as we navigated the text we read in class.

As we engaged in reading, my students annotated their thoughts directly in the margins of their texts. They highlighted key ideas and significant scenes, which supported their comprehension and facilitated a more interactive reading experience. My instructional approach was designed to cultivate active reading practices, thereby encouraging my students to move beyond passive engagement with the text, a challenge that had previously hindered their ability to derive meaning from complex literary works (Fisher & Frey, 2018).

When we reached designated sections of the text for dialectical responses, I presented the pre-developed questions and introduced the structured format for student responses. To support my students in developing their responses, I provided an example displayed on flip chart paper, and on the reverse side of the dialectical journal graphic organizer distributed in class. I allotted approximately 18 minutes for students to complete each response and allowed them to work independently or collaboratively in pairs. During this time, I circulated throughout the room, offering feedback and reiterating the expectations for the quality and depth of their dialectical journal entries.

### Crafting the Claim

The initial step in constructing a dialectical response required my students to identify a quote that aligned with the guiding question and to formulate a clear claim (see Figure 1) that served as the controlling idea of their analysis. Their claims needed to connect explicitly to the literary device identified in the question. To support my students as they began writing, I provided sentence stems to reduce the cognitive demands associated with written expression. This allowed them to focus on the content of their responses rather than the mechanics of phrasing their ideas (Rodriguez-Mojica & Briceño, 2018). The use of sentence stems also promoted grammatical accuracy and syntactic coherence, enhancing the clarity and precision of their writing.

Figure 1: Dialectical Entry: Claim

Dialectical Journal Question	Quote	Sentence Stem	Example
In Chapter 6, what is one internal conflict Lorraine faces, and how does the conflict contribute to the linear progression of the plot?	“Lorraine kept replaying the prank call in her mind, feeling a knot tighten in her stomach each time she remembered how easily Mr. Pignati had trusted her. Even though the call had started as a silly game between her and John, she could not shake the feeling that they had crossed a line.” (Zindel, 2005, p. 54)	This quote engages my interest because it is an example of [insert literary device and provide explanation about it].	This quote engages my interest because it is an example of <b>internal conflict</b> . The conflict is <b>Lorraine</b> versus her <b>guilt about the prank phone call that led her and John to meet the Pigman</b> .

A key challenge at this stage, however, was ensuring that my students possessed a strong understanding of the literary devices themselves. Because the dialectical journal entries centered on these devices, my students needed to know both their definitions and how to apply them within a text; without this conceptual knowledge, they struggled to articulate meaningful claims and to explain how the author employed literary devices to shape textual meaning.

### Analyzing Author’s Craft

The second component of the dialectical journal response required my students to analyze the author’s craft (see Figure 2). I wanted them to recognize that authors make deliberate choices when using literary devices. During this stage, my students identified the specific literary devices employed by the author and articulated how and why each device was used within the text (Thompson, 2018). This step extended beyond developing a conceptual understanding of literary devices and instead focused on strengthening my students’ capacity to critically analyze authorial choices, a process that required the use of higher-order thinking skills.

**Figure 2:** Dialectical Entry: Author’s Craft

Sentence Stem	Example
This author uses [insert literary device] to advance the plot by...	The author uses the <b>internal conflict</b> to advance the plot by emphasizing how Lorraine’s initial actions of pranking the Pigman have changed.

One challenge associated with this component was helping my students understand why authors employ specific literary devices. Before advancing to the dialectical journal process, I devoted time to mini-lessons designed to build students’ knowledge of how authors use specific devices. For example, in a mini-lesson on similes, I taught students the definition of the term, how to identify similes within a text, and how to create their own examples. In connection with author’s craft, I introduced my students to the primary ways authors use similes: (1) to create imagery, (2) to make descriptions engaging, and (3) to evoke emotions. While this was not an exhaustive explanation of how authors use similes, it provided my students with a foundational understanding of some of the ways similes function in texts. This same instructional process was applied to all the literary devices discussed in class.

### Writing the Analysis

In the final step of the dialectical journal response, my students composed a brief analysis of why the author uses the literary device (see Figure 3). I wanted my students to think critically about how the author’s literary choices impacted the text. This step is important because it helped my students understand how authors intentionally use literary devices to shape meaning, develop themes, and influence readers’ interpretations.

**Figure 3:** Dialectical Entry: Writing the Analysis

Sentence Stem	Example
The author uses [insert literary device] to show...	The author uses <b>Lorraine’s internal conflict</b> to show her developing relationship (her care, love) for the Pigman.

According to Marzano and Toth (2014), the process of constructing and defending claims prompts students to critically evaluate their reasoning, thereby increasing the rigor of the instructional task. Upon completing these steps, my students produced one full dialectical journal entry (see Figure 4) and subsequently applied the same structured process to complete the remaining entries. Each assignment required a minimum of four fully developed dialectical journal entries.

**Figure 4:** Dialectical Entry

This quote engages my interest because it is an example of **internal conflict**. The conflict is **Lorriane** versus her **guilt about the prank phone call that led her and John to meet the Pigman**. The author uses the **internal conflict** to advance the plot by emphasizing how Lorriane’s initial actions of pranking the Pigman have changed. The author uses **Lorraine’s internal conflict** to show her developing relationship (her care, love) for the Pigman.

*Note.* The above-mentioned dialectical journal entry is a researcher-created example modeled after actual student work. The original student sample could not be included in this manuscript due to copy clarity. Please see Appendix B for a sample dialectical journal response.

### **Using Technology to Support Dialectical Journals**

Because our society is becoming increasingly technological, it is important that students also understand how to use technology as an avenue for developing their writing skills. In my classroom, I used a dialectical journal graphic organizer for students to complete their responses; however, there were times when I gave them the opportunity to complete the journal using a digital application: (1) the [Verso Learning app](#), (2) [Google Docs](#), or (3) the [Kami app](#). I integrated these digital applications into my classroom to provide students with varied modalities for engaging with the dialectical journaling process, thereby supporting the differentiated learning needs of my students.

I used the Verso Learning app to invite my students to participate in virtual discussions, similar to a discussion board. I used this strategy by selecting a dialectical journal question, which I subsequently posted on the platform. Next, I instructed my students to draft their responses on paper, after which they transcribed their final responses into the digital application, adhering to the prescribed dialectical journal format. Upon posting their initial responses, my students posted a response to at least one peer’s post, fostering a collaborative learning environment. Integrating the Verso Learning app into my classroom served two primary purposes: (1) to provide a platform for my students’ voices in classroom instruction (Parveen & Rajesh, 2018), and (2) to give my students practice typing responses to literature in a virtual application.

I also integrated Google Docs and the Kami app into my classroom. Utilizing Google Docs, I assigned dialectical journal prompts for my students to complete. Upon completing their entries, my students received feedback either directly from me or through peer reviews within assigned pairs. These peer assessments were guided by a rubric and were documented directly within the Google Docs file. Research scholars (Yim et al., 2016) found that integrating Google Docs in the English language arts classrooms improved writing outcomes by facilitating real-time collaboration and feedback. On the other hand, the Kami app is an application in which documents can be uploaded into editable PDFs. I emailed the dialectical journals in PDF form to my students, who then uploaded them to the Kami app to type their responses directly into the document. This method offered a flexible and interactive approach to completing writing tasks. Overall, providing my students with opportunities to engage in virtual writing spaces not only supported the development

of their technological literacy but also increased student engagement and facilitated meaningful interactions through writing.

### Conclusion

Throughout my experience teaching at both the middle and high school levels, I consistently observed that many of my students struggled to find meaning in the texts we explored. Too often, they read passively, missing opportunities to question, reflect, and form their own interpretations. The dialectical journal proved to be a powerful tool in addressing this challenge. By fostering an ongoing dialogue *with* and *about* texts, this strategy empowered my students to think critically, examine the author's craft, and connect personally with characters and themes. With thoughtful modeling and regular practice, my students began to shift from passive recipients of information to active, engaged readers and writers.

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### Author Biography

Dr. Whitaker (he/him) has over 20 years of experience in education, having served as an English language arts (ELA) teacher at both the middle and high school levels, as well as an assistant principal at the elementary and middle school levels. In his current roles, he provides teacher training for ELA educators during the summer through Teach for America and serves as an adjunct

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## Appendix A

### Dialectical Journal

Name:

Date:

Period:

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**INSTRUCTIONS:** As you read, choose quotes from the text that are **meaningful** or **significant**. For each quote you select, (1) explain the literary device that connects to the quote, (2) why the author uses it, and (3) how the device achieves a specific purpose. Focus on quotes that are rich in meaning and encourage deep, critical thinking.

Quotation	Page Number	Interpretation
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

Appendix B

Student Dialectical Journal Response

Dialectical Journal: As you read the text, select quotes from the text that you believe are *important*. Interpret the quotes and explain the connection to the literary text. Remember: You are looking for quotes that **ARE RICH** with meaning and stimulate critical thought.

Quotation	Page Number	Interpretation/Meaning of Quote This Quote means.....
"No - There's something come down between me and them that don't let us understand each other and I don't know what it is. - What is it that's changing Ruth."	52	This quote engages my interest because it is an example of <u>internal conflict</u> . The conflict is <u>Mama vs her guilt</u> . The author reveals this conflict to show that her children act different from how they were raised, out of hand, and she feels <u>guilty</u> of it.
"You couldn't be on my side that long for nothing, could you? - A man needs for a woman to back him up..."	32	This quote engages my interest because it is an example of <u>indirect characterization</u> . The trait revealed about Walter is that he is in need of <u>reassurance</u> which he lacks. The author reveals this trait to show that Walter lacks <u>support</u> for any situation, specifically his wife.
"(Trying to keep MAMA from noticing)" - "RUTH! Ruth honey - what's the matter with you... Ruth!"	53	This quote engages my interest because it is an example of <u>plot</u> . The plot is <u>rising action</u> . The author reveals this plot to show that there could possibly be something wrong or a <u>medical condition</u> with Ruth.
"That money belongs to Mama, - I don't care if she wants to buy a house or a rocketship or just nail it up somewhere and look at it. It's hers. Not ours - hers."	36-37	This quote engages my interest because it is an example of <u>figurative language</u> . The figurative language is an <u>idiom</u> . The author reveals this device to show that Mama is more important than they are and that she <u>deserves</u> the money.