Kansas English

2026, Volume 107

Kansas Association of Teachers of English

Sun Seeker by Jenni Bader

In this issue ...

Kansas English

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Kansas English Author Guide

Kansas English is the peer-reviewed journal of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE), edited by Katherine Cramer, Professor of English Education at Wichita State University. It publishes articles and materials on subjects of interest to English and literacy teachers at all levels, including practitioner pieces, scholarly articles, reflective essays, interviews, book reviews, teaching tips, and creative works. *Kansas English* publishes about 75 percent of the manuscripts it receives each year. Specifically, consider submitting the following types of manuscripts:

1. **Practitioner Pieces** describing how you teach a particular text, skill, or concept in your English language arts and/or literacy classroom.
2. **Scholarly Articles**, including research studies and academic arguments supported by research in English and/or literacy education.
3. **Reflective Essays** about teaching English language arts and/or literacy.
4. **Creative Works** (e.g., poetry, vignettes) related to teaching English and/or literacy.
5. **Interviews** with authors (children's, YA, and adult) and experts in the field of English language arts and/or literacy.
6. **Book Reviews** of recently published English/literacy pedagogy texts.
7. **Conversation Pieces** in response to previously published work in *Kansas English*.
8. **Kansas-Specific Articles** that would be of interest to English and/or literacy teachers in Kansas.

Learn more about manuscript and submission requirements on the "**Write for Kansas English**" page of the *KE* website. In addition, *Kansas English* features several editor-reviewed columns for which authors can submit the following types of manuscripts.

Children's Book/Media Reviews
Column Editor: Sun Young Lee
Associate Professor of Literacy Education
Wichita State University
Wichita, Kansas

Teaching Tips
Column Editor: Beth Gulley
Professor of English
Johnson County Community College
Overland Park, Kansas

Young Adult (YA) Book Reviews
Column Editor: Kevin Kienholz
Professor of English and Modern Languages
Director of English Education
Emporia State University
Emporia, Kansas

Learn more about column manuscript and submission requirements on the "**KE Columns**" page of the *KE* website.

DEADLINE for submissions for the 2027 issue of *Kansas English*: January 15, 2027

Kansas English 2026, Volume 107

Children's Book Reviews (cont.)

Young Adult Book Reviews

Teaching Tips

FROM THE EDITOR: THE ATTACKS ON PUBLIC EDUCATION CONTINUE

Katherine Mason Cramer, *Kansas English* Editor-in-Chief
Wichita State University

Abstract
Kansas English Editor-in-Chief Katie Cramer laments the continued attacks on public education and democracy through anti-intellectual rhetoric, policies, executive orders, bills, and laws at the state and federal levels, and connects these attacks to book bans and censorship that harm public school teachers and students. She also previews the 2026 issue of *Kansas English*.

Keywords: book bans, censorship, anti-intellectualism, anticipatory obedience, democracy

Kansas English Editor Katie Cramer

In my editor's letter one year ago, I wrote about the policies and rhetoric spewing from our state and federal governments that "limit free speech, distort or erase history, and harm vulnerable populations locally, nationally, and globally" (Cramer, 2025, p. 1). Unfortunately, the anti-democratic and anti-intellectual rhetoric, policies, executive orders, bills, and laws have continued with head-spinning speed and aggression over the past year.

Last summer, President Trump signed the Big Beautiful Bill, "a cruel law that slashes funding for healthcare, food assistance, public schools, and colleges to pay for tax breaks for the ultra-wealthy" (Ben-Ghiat, 2025). In addition, "his administration has cut or withheld billions in federal grant funding, arrested student activists, targeted diversity initiatives, and sought to undermine academic freedom and university independence by tying funding and preferential treatment to adherence to a coercive compact" (Weingarten & Wolfson, 2026).

In Kansas, a provision in the state budget bill—signed into law by Governor Laura Kelly in April 2026, despite her significant reservations (Kansas Office of the Governor, 2026)—prohibits public universities and colleges from requiring students to complete a "DEI-CRT course," the definition of which will be determined later by the Kansas Board of Regents (Margolies, 2026). Regarding this budget provision, PEN America's Freedom to Learn Program Director Amy Reid stated:

> When lawmakers tell students and faculty that some ideas are off-limits, it doesn't just censor classroom discussions, it also impoverishes communities as students enter the workforce with a redacted education. Politicians and political appointees should not be in the business

> of telling students what ideas are allowed and which are taboo. Slipping these provisions into a budget bill is just a sloppy strategy to camouflage censorship. (Margolies, 2026).

Speaking of censorship and the creation of a less informed electorate subject to the whims of autocrats, PEN America reports that in AY 2024-2025, there were 6,870 instances of book bans of 3,752 unique titles in 87 school districts nationwide (Baêta, et al., 2025). Shockingly, of the 2,520 bans enacted due to the presence or threat of state laws, "only 3% of the bans were triggered by a law requiring the removal of a book – the rest, 97%, came from bans caused by the fear that districts had of being out of compliance, regardless of whether the law was enjoined, hadn't been passed yet, or didn't call for the direct removal of books" (Baêta, et al., 2025). This is also known as anticipatory obedience (Protect Democracy, 2026).

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools on military bases engaged in anticipatory obedience when they removed 596 books from school bookshelves in July 2025 (Tolin, 2025), despite no direct reference to books in Trump's executive orders that aim to limit and control information to which students have access (Baêta, et al., 2025). Interestingly, one of the banned books is Elizabeth Rusch's nonfiction young adult book *You Call THIS Democracy? How to Fix Our Government and Deliver Power to the People* (2020).

In fact, PEN America experts (Magnusson et al., 2026) report an uptick in nonfiction book bans in AY 2024-2025 with over 1,100 unique nonfiction titles banned from public school libraries and classrooms. Removal of educational/informational books rose from 5% of titles banned in AY 2023-2024 to 13% of titles banned in AY 2024-2025 (nearly 500 unique titles), with the most banned topic being "activism and social movements." The report's authors note:

> The increase in educational/informational titles within a larger erasure of nonfiction titles underscores the rising influence of anti-intellectualism in public spheres. The removal of educational/informational titles highlights the growing censorship of information, facts, and accounting of history and events available in public K–12 education across America. (Magnusson et al., 2026)

Here in Kansas, one school district banned one book in AY 2024-2025—thankfully a far cry from Florida's 2,304 instances of book bans in 33 of its 67 public school districts (Baêta et al., 2025). Kansas's Gardner-Edgerton district removed Donna Gephart's *Lily and Duncan* (2016), which features two 8th-grade characters who alternate narrating the story. It was not required reading, and school board members who voted for the ban justified it with complaints about positive depictions of gender-affirming care and supportive family members (Kaminski, 2025). Having read and written about the book myself eight years ago (Cramer, 2018), I can say without a doubt it would be a strong addition to classroom and school libraries at the middle and high school levels.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten (2025) notes that book bans are one method authoritarians use to "attack truth, knowledge, and critical thinking because an uninformed public is easier to control." And Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2025) argues that "the authoritarians' goal is not just to create a hostile work environment for library and teaching staff but also to pressure administrators to submit to corrupt tactics such as banning books on spurious grounds and accepting slanderous speech used against their colleagues."

Three years ago in *Kansas English*, Jessica Marston (2023) published a comprehensive literature review of the history of censorship in schools, noting a common goal of power and control by the censors across time and place, while also providing specific resources and strategies for teachers to combat censorship. I urge you to (re-)read it.

And then, I urge you to share your stories, ideas, and advice with us—in *Kansas English*, at the KATE Fall Conference, and in KATE Pages. Here are two questions you might consider as you draft future *Kansas English* (or other) submissions:

1. What are you doing in your classrooms (PreK-12 and higher education), libraries, book study groups, and PD sessions to combat the anti-intellectualism hurling toward us at the state and federal levels?
2. How are you supporting your students in critically reading the word and the world—and talking back to it from an informed perspective?

I wrote it last year in this space, and it still applies today: *Raise your voices. Raise your pens and keyboards. Silence is not an option.*

2026 Issue Preview

Welcome to another energizing issue of *Kansas English*. This year's authors provide us with scholarly, practitioner, reflective, and creative pieces that will enlighten and inspire us.

KATE's President **Rebecca Pflughoeft** reveals how ELA teachers inspired her own teaching journey and celebrates collaboration, growth, and leadership opportunities within KATE.

KATE Fall Conference Co-Chair **Amanda Stinemetz** provides a preview of this year's conference, including the keynote speakers, conference theme, and exciting collaborations with other literacy groups across the state.

In his practitioner piece, "Dialoguing *with* and *about* Texts: Using Dialectical Journals in the English Classroom," **Adam Whitaker** advocates for the use of dialectical journals to enhance students' reading comprehension, analysis, interpretation, and perspective-taking.

Sandra L. Bequette ponders Donalyn Miller's concept of wild reading and how it is integral to effective literacy instruction in a reflective essay entitled "Musings about Wild Readers and the Science of Reading Classroom of Today: Where Have All the Readers Gone?"

In her reflective essay, "On the Question of Ethical Application of Large Language Models in the Writing Classroom," **April Pameticky** reflects on the ethical and pedagogical implications of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the ELA curriculum, drawing from her year-long exploration of AI in partnership with the Midwest Cohort of the National Writing Project and the Flint Hills Writing Project.

Thomas Lichty shares how he implemented LETRS principles in a secondary special education classroom in his reflective essay entitled "Creating Confident Readers and Writers in the Special Education Classroom."

In their scholarly article "Enhancing Writing Quality in Secondary Classrooms: A Study of the Writing with Purpose Routine," **Suzanne Myers** and **Jocelyn Washburn** examine the influence of an instructional routine called *Writing with Purpose* on four high school English language arts classrooms, finding that the routine may be an effective instructional approach for improving adolescent writing quality.

Avery Gathright recounts a challenging and enlightening moment during her teaching internship in a creative piece entitled "We're Bored: A Narrative Reflection."

Similarly, in a creative reflection entitled "The In-Between," **Alice Huelskamp** shares snapshots of individual students with whom she built relationships during her year-long teaching internship and whom she will continue to know and teach as she begins her career at the same school this August.

In two children's book reviews and seven young adult (YA) book reviews, **Hailey Arand-Mayorga**, **Katherine Cramer, Alice Huelskamp, Sasha Joy, Kevin Kienholz, Amanda K. Stinemetz**, and **Danny Wade** elevate recently published children's and YA books that we should add to our classroom and/or personal libraries.

And finally, the Teaching Tips column brings us pedagogical strategies that we can immediately adapt and integrate into our curricular design. Column authors for this issue include **Miriam Barton, Sasha Joy, Beth Gulley**, and **Katherine Cramer.**

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Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is starting her 17th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools, and she has maintained her Kansas teaching licenses (ELA 5-9 and 7-12) so that a joyful return to the middle or high school ELA classroom is always possible. She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.

PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Rebecca Pflughoeft, KATE President
McPherson High School

Abstract
KATE President Rebecca Pflughoeft shares a personal story of how influential English language arts (ELA) teachers sparked her lifelong passion for reading and writing, shaping her path from an intended social science teacher to an ELA educator. Pflughoeft emphasizes the importance of fostering a love of reading and maintaining high expectations for students; expresses gratitude for the unexpected opportunities within KATE, including serving as its president; and celebrates the community of passionate ELA teachers.

Keywords: KATE, imagination, creativity, English Language Arts (ELA), reading, writing, dedicated teachers, classroom experiences, gratitude

KATE President Rebecca Pflughoeft

The theme for the Kansas Association of Teachers of English Fall 2026 Conference "Reading and Writing Between Worlds—Imagination and Creativity in ELA" affords us an opportunity to ponder on where we have been and where we are going as English language arts (ELA) educators. As has been the case with many opportunities that have presented themselves to me during my lifetime, my involvement with KATE has taken me on unexpected journeys, connected me with wonderful, collaborative ELA educators from across Kansas, provided me with opportunities that I could never have imagined for myself, and reminded me of where my love for ELA began. In a short time, I have been honored to participate, learn, grow, connect, and serve in KATE, an association of which I am now proud to serve as president.

Not many things in my life have gone as originally planned. I initially set out to become a secondary social science teacher. I often stop and connect the dots along my journey, and they always lead back to the teachers who inspired me to be who I still dream about becoming the best version of to this day. I wasn't aware while I was growing up, but my ELA teachers made an impact on my life that often causes me to stop and ponder where I was as their student and where I am now as an ELA teacher with my own students.

My sixth-grade teacher inspired such a strong love of reading in her students by providing time to sit and devour books. Drop Everything and Read Days were super special in her classroom. By junior high, it was evident that the ELA teachers at the secondary level in my school district had a relentless expectation of excellence from their students. I wanted to meet their expectations and perform at a successful level. What they were saying and doing became important to me. I was taught the proper rules of grammar and composition, how to read and analyze literature, conduct research, write essays and research papers, write and deliver speeches, and how to act and sing in a musical, all by my outstanding ELA teachers. I had no idea then how much of an impact they were making on my life and how the dots along my journey would connect and eventually lead me to my

own ELA classroom. I now zealously work to help my own students foster and maintain a love of reading and also have relentless expectations of excellence for them.

My planned journey of becoming a secondary social science teacher led me into a special education classroom where I taught resource reading. The love and interest in the written word that was ignited back in the sixth grade and continued to be supported throughout my adolescent years eventually led me to a secondary ELA classroom.

Imagine my surprise when I recently learned that one of my high school ELA teachers was a long-time member of KATE. She was an editor of KATE's Update newsletter. I got teary when I became aware of this fact. I also found myself a bit hopeful that my teachers would be proud of the work that I do each day, aspiring to be as great an educator as they were for me. I find myself remembering the skills that they instilled in me when I'm teaching my own students how to read, write, and critically think in the real world while they imagine the futures that they can and will create for themselves.

I am incredibly honored to serve as the President of KATE. Much like many of the dots along my journey, this position was not a stop that I planned along the way. I am proud to serve such a wonderful association of the greatest teachers from across the state. I am thankful for the members of KATE who have had a hand in inspiring me to connect and serve. I truly believe that ELA teachers are some of the coolest people on Earth. There isn't a day that I'm not proud to walk on this journey with all of you. May we all continue to make our teachers proud and to serve our students by helping them imagine and create the world of their dreams.

Author Biography

Rebecca Pflughoeft (B.A. Social Science Education, History, Political Science; M.S., Adaptive Special Education) is the current President of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English. She teaches English at McPherson High School, USD 418 McPherson Public Schools. She is a member of NCTE and serves on the William Allen White Book Awards Selection Committee. She can be reached at rebecca.pflughoeft@mcpherson.com or kansasenglishpresident@gmail.com.

https://www.kansasenglish.org/apply-for-awards-scholarships-board-membership.html

CORE ESSENTIALS AND COLLABORATION AT KATE CON

Amanda Stinemetz
Fort Hays State University

Abstract
2026 KATE Conference co-chair Amanda Stinemetz shares the theme, keynote speakers, and professional collaborations with the Kansas Book Festival and Kansas Association of School Librarians for the upcoming fall conference, which takes place in Wichita, KS, Oct. 30-31, 2026.

Keywords: KATE Conference, Guadalupe Garcia McCall, Wendy R. Williams, imagination, realism, collaboration

KATE Conference Co-Chair Amanda Stinemetz

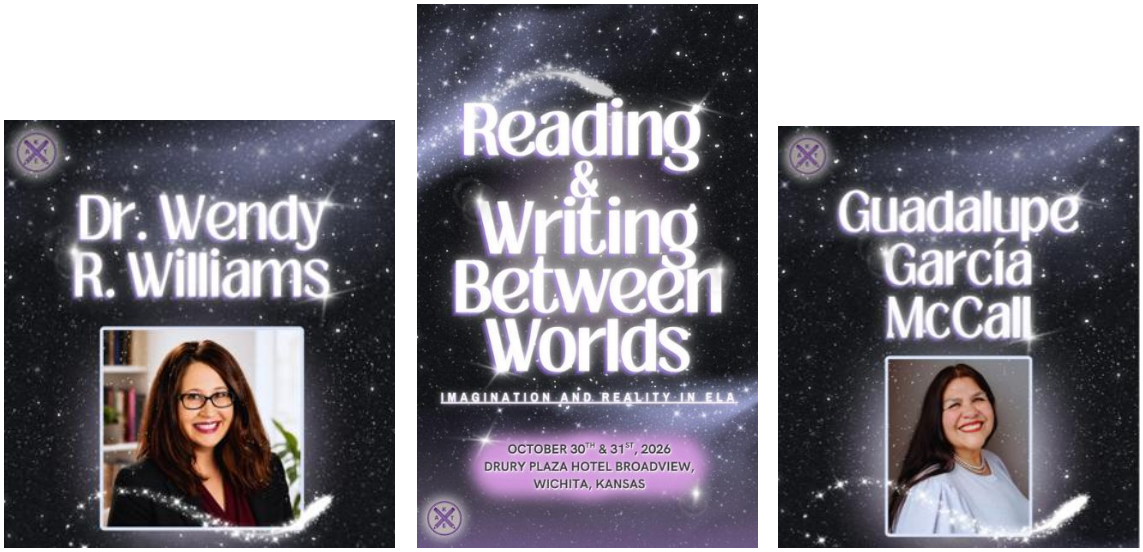
The 2026 KATE Conference is assembled with core essentials that attendees and KATE members love, celebrate, and eagerly anticipate every year. This year's theme of "Reading and Writing Between Worlds: Imagination and Reality in ELA" aligns fantastically with the Saturday keynote speaker, author Guadalupe Garcia McCall, who has an extensive inventory of novels, many of which dive into magical realism. Several of her novels, including *Under the Mesquite* (2011), *Summer of the Mariposas* (2012), *Shame the Stars* (2016), and *Echoes of Grace* (2022), have received prestigious awards; however, the list of notable novels is quite vast. Additionally, the Friday NCTE keynote, Dr. Wendy R. Williams, will present about how to inspire, motivate, and mentor youth writers, which aligns with her publication *Mentoring Youth Writers: Six Strategies to Bring Out the Author in Every Student* (2025). To further enhance the conference overall, an assortment of breakout sessions will be delivered by educators and academics involved in English and literacy education at all levels. Indeed, KATECon 2026 will again deliver on its standard of quality by serving, networking, and invigorating attendees.

With that said, there are also new developments underway that we believe will enhance the conference experience overall. For starters, the 2026 KATE Conference committee has been in communication with the Kansas Book Festival leadership team to explore collaboration between the two organizations, thereby encouraging Kansas authors (and authors who write about Kansas) to engage with Kansas educators. Ideally, this will result in authors visiting schools for specialized book discussions, classroom activities, or student-writing workshops, ultimately arranging for Kansas authors to inspire students. Similarly, the committee has also been in touch with the Kansas Association of School Librarians (KASL) about arranging a social hour where educators and librarians can network and strategize about ways to collaborate during the school year, especially

since the KASL Conference concludes the same day that the KATE Conference begins. Planning ahead, we are optimistic that advanced conference planning will allow KASL to be more involved, especially when its biannual conference rotation lands in Wichita to overlap with KATECon.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge an additional change to KATECon 2026. After several years of service and absolute dedication to piecing together the puzzle of the conference, Mr. Nathan Whitman has surrendered the task of conference chair. In fact, the task was so complex that two people were required to accept the challenge of planning the conference as co-chairs. Through Nathan's direction and oversight, Ms. Amanda Little and Dr. Amanda K. Stinemetz (affectionately referred to as "The A Team") are coordinating, planning, and sharing the duties of building the 2026 KATE Conference. Tackling the conference as a co-chair team (with Nathan on site to assist) has afforded the luxury of time and division of work to explore suggestions made by conference attendees in the past. To the point, by focusing on core essentials that represent the heart of the KATE Conference, while also dabbling in collaborative opportunities of mutual interest and benefits, we are thrilled for the experience that KATECon 2026 will deliver to its attendees and members.

Author Biography:
Amanda Stinemetz, Ph.D., is entering her 19th year of teaching. While finishing her MA, Amanda was central in creating a university-level English as a Second Language (ESL) Program. During this time (2008-2017), she taught and extensively traveled to build international partnerships and recruit students. While briefly away from Kansas (2018-2021), Amanda served as Director of Internationalization at Fairmont State University and was also the State Coordinator for DE English. Upon returning to Kansas (from West Virginia), she taught ELA at a rural high school. She returned to Fort Hays State University in fall 2023 as Assistant Professor of English and is currently the Coordinator of Secondary ELA Teacher Education. She has maintained a KATE membership for most of her teaching career; in 2024, she was appointed to the position of English Language Learner (ELL) liaison on the KATE Board. She has also served as KATE Secretary and KATE Conference Co-Chair since 2025. Amanda can be reached at akstinemetz@fhsu.edu.



Learn more about the KATE Conference and register at https://www.kansasenglish.org/fall-conference.html.

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

Adam Whitaker
Franklin University

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 *analyze* how **internal** and **external conflicts** contribute to the linear progression of the plot.	1. In Chapter 5, how does Mr. Pignati's internal conflict on page 33 contribute to the linear progression of the plot? 2. In Chapter 5, how does the external conflict between John and Lorraine contribute to the linear progression of the plot? 3. In Chapter 5, how does Mr. Pignati's internal conflict on page 37 contribute to the linear progression of the plot? 4. In Chapter 6, what is one internal conflict Lorraine faces, and how does the conflict contribute to the linear progression of the plot?

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 **internal conflict**. The conflict is **Lorriane** versus her **guilt about the prank phone call that led her and John to meet the Pigman**.

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 **internal conflict** to advance the plot by emphasizing how Lorriane'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 **Lorraine's internal conflict** 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

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Appendix A

Dialectical Journal

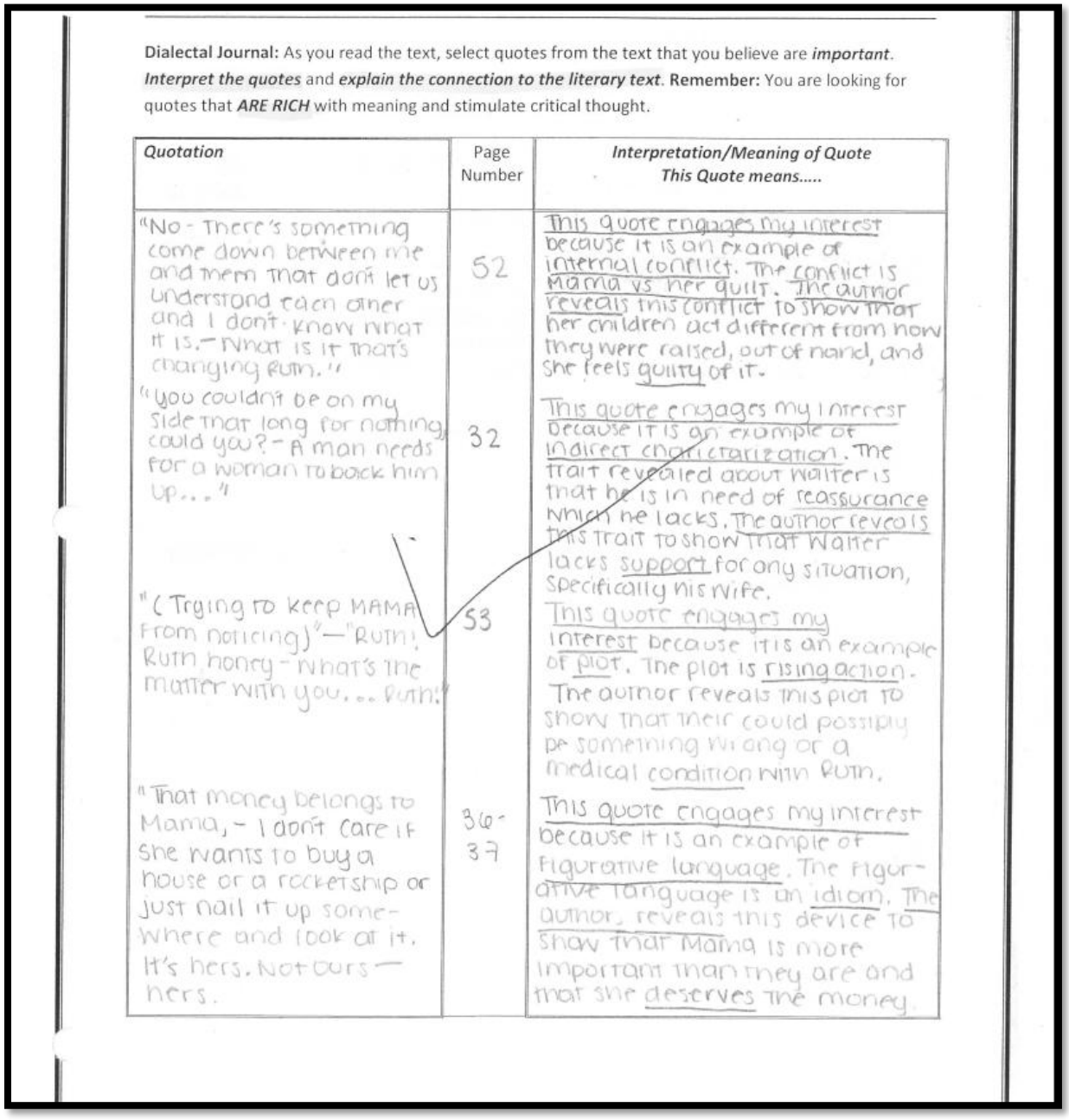
Name: Date: Period:

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



Dialectal 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 internal conflict. The conflict is Mama vs her guilt. The author reveals this conflict to show that her children act different from how they were raised, out of hand, and she feels guilty 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 indirect characterization. The trait revealed about Walter is that he is in need of reassurance which he lacks. The author reveals this trait to show that Walter lacks support 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 plot. The plot is rising action. The author reveals this plot to show that their could possibly be something wrong or a medical condition 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 figurative language. The figurative language is an idiom. The author, reveals this device to show that Mama is more important than they are and that she deserves the money.

MUSINGS ABOUT WILD READERS AND THE SCIENCE OF READING CLASSROOM OF TODAY: WHERE HAVE ALL THE READERS GONE?

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Abstract
Contemporary Science of Reading initiatives have strengthened literacy instruction by emphasizing evidence-based practices that support foundational skill development and equitable access to reading. However, these measures alone offer limited insight into whether students develop identities as motivated, lifelong readers. Drawing on reflective practice and Donalyn Miller's concept of wild reading, this essay argues that effective literacy instruction must attend not only to cognitive skill acquisition, but also to reading motivation, classroom environment, student agency, and teacher beliefs—factors that shape not only how students learn to read, but how they engage with the world as readers. Through narrative reflection, classroom examples, and connections to literacy scholarship, this paper examines how access to texts, student choice, and meaningful relationships support the development of reader identity and the transfer of reading skills into sustained engagement. It offers a conceptual perspective that connects Science of Reading–aligned instruction with the development of reader identity, positioning these as interconnected rather than competing priorities. It further contends that wild reading is not a discrete, scheduled activity, but a student-centered philosophy that fosters motivation, ownership, and enduring reading practices that extend beyond the classroom and into the broader social world.

Keywords: wild reading, science of reading, reading identity, motivation

Award-winning educator and free-reading advocate Donalyn Miller writes in *Reading in the Wild*, her 2014 companion to *The Book Whisperer*:

> While students' standardized test performance, fluency checks, and use of comprehension strategies indicated whether they mastered basic reading processes, none of the data tell me whether my students are readers beyond a school-based definition. I can prove students' reading levels, I can prove whether they have mastered the reading standards I am required to teach, and I can prove their ability to read strategically. But I cannot prove whether my students will be avid readers in the future. And no one asks me to prove it. (p. xviii)

Miller captures a central tension in today's literacy landscape—one that feels especially pronounced within the current Science of Reading initiative. Contemporary literacy reform has rightly emphasized evidence-based instruction in foundational skills such as phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Petscher et al., 2020). These practices are essential for ensuring that all children, particularly those historically underserved, gain access to the code of

written language. Yet while these efforts help determine whether students *can* read, they offer far less insight into whether students *choose* to read—a distinction closely tied to motivation and engagement (Wigfield et al., 2016).

This concern is not isolated to U.S. contexts. A growing body of international research indicates a decline in students' reading for enjoyment across countries, alongside strong evidence that reading engagement is a critical driver of reading achievement and broader academic attainment (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). In fact, differences in reading engagement account for substantial variation in performance, often exceeding differences attributed to gender and demographic factors, underscoring the central role of motivation in literacy development (Wigfield et al., 2016). Students who read more frequently and with greater enjoyment develop stronger vocabulary, comprehension, and overall academic outcomes over time, as sustained engagement increases reading volume and opportunity to learn (Allington, 2011; Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024; Wigfield et al., 2016). In this way, students who read for pleasure are more likely to experience cumulative academic advantages and sustained engagement in learning across the lifespan (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). The development of "wild readers," therefore, is not peripheral to academic success—it is foundational to it (Miller, 2014).

Literacy research consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between reading motivation and comprehension; however, students' motivation to read—and their engagement with reading—often declines across the school years (Wigfield et al., 2016), highlighting a concerning disconnect between what supports reading success and how reading is experienced in classrooms. This pattern suggests that the challenge is not only developing readers but sustaining their motivation to read across advancing grade levels. When instruction prioritizes skill development without attending to motivation, students may learn to read without developing the habits that support ongoing engagement (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020).

This tension resonates deeply with my experience as both a former PK-12 teacher and current teacher educator. I can document reading levels, analyze assessment data, and demonstrate fidelity to evidence-based practices; however, these indicators do not reveal whether students see themselves as readers or carry reading beyond the classroom. Increasing emphasis on assessment, pacing, and fidelity to scripted instruction—while grounded in legitimate concerns about literacy outcomes—can unintentionally narrow opportunities for meaningful engagement with text. What is often missing is the connection to reading that fuels sustained engagement.

For the purposes of this paper, wild readers are defined as individuals who demonstrate intrinsic motivation—a self-driven desire to engage in reading—alongside sustained engagement and the ability to independently select, reflect on, and value reading beyond school-based expectations (Miller, 2014). Building on this definition, wild reading is conceptualized not only as the development of this reader identity, but also as the classroom conditions and instructional approaches that support it.

Central to this conceptualization is reading motivation, defined as the combination of beliefs, values, goals, and interests that shape individuals' engagement with reading and their willingness to persist over time (Wigfield et al., 2016). Reading motivation influences whether students choose to read and continue reading over time and serves as a precursor to reading engagement—the behavioral and cognitive involvement students demonstrate during reading—which in turn supports reading achievement (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020). Students who engage in more frequent and sustained reading experiences tend to demonstrate stronger reading outcomes over time (Allington, 2011; Wigfield et al., 2016), a finding reinforced by international research linking reading enjoyment to academic success across contexts (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). Wild reading, therefore, extends beyond skill proficiency to include how and why individuals choose to engage with text across contexts and throughout their lives.

This paper offers a conceptual perspective that positions Science of Reading–aligned instruction and the development of reader identity as interconnected rather than competing priorities. Science of Reading–aligned instruction provides the essential foundation for literacy development (Petscher et al., 2020); however, without attention to the motivational, emotional, and environmental factors that shape how students engage with reading, it is unlikely to support reading that extends beyond the classroom—what Miller (2014) describes as "reading in the wild." As opportunities for sustained, self-directed reading decline, the implications extend beyond individual achievement to how individuals engage with ideas, perspectives, and one another in a diverse and interconnected society (Bones et al., 2025; International Literacy Association, 2018).

To better understand this tension, it is necessary to more closely examine the relationship between skill development and reading engagement, as well as the conditions that support sustained, self-directed reading. The following section explores the concept of "wild reading" as a framework for understanding how reader identity, motivation, and instructional context intersect. In doing so, it considers how classrooms might move beyond developing proficient readers toward cultivating individuals who choose to read across contexts and throughout their lives.

Where Have All the Readers Gone?

Would I have become a reader in today's Science of Reading–driven classrooms, where instruction is increasingly shaped by the development of discrete, measurable skills? More specifically, would I have become what Miller (2014) describes as a "wild reader"—someone who reads not because it is required, but because it is meaningful, engaging, and part of daily life?

When I reflect on my own development as a reader, I am struck by how much of it occurred outside of formal instruction. My love of reading was not built through carefully sequenced lessons or assessment-driven tasks, but through time, access, and the freedom to explore texts that mattered to me. I spent hours in the library, selecting books based on curiosity rather than requirement. Teachers noticed my interests and nudged me toward new authors and genres, but the ownership of reading remained mine. Reading was not something I did only in school; it was something I carried with me.

This reflection raises a pressing question: are students today developing these same habits as readers—or has something fundamentally shifted? Recent analyses of national data indicate a sharp and sustained decline in reading for pleasure in the United States, with daily participation dropping from approximately one in four individuals in the early 2000s to just over one in six by 2023—a decline of nearly 40% (Bone et al., 2025). These declines are not uniform; disparities have widened across racial, socioeconomic, and educational lines, suggesting that opportunities to engage in reading for pleasure remain uneven. Taken together, these patterns point not only to a reduction in reading frequency, but to a broader erosion of reading as a regular, meaningful part of daily life.

Similarly, the International Literacy Association (2018) warns that opportunities for independent reading and read-alouds—long considered foundational to literacy development—are increasingly marginalized in schools due to time constraints and accountability pressures. These converging trends suggest a troubling shift: while students may be developing reading skills, they are engaging less frequently in reading as a meaningful, self-directed practice. For many students, particularly those without access to reading-rich environments outside of school, reduced opportunities to read during the school day may also mean reduced opportunities to read at all.

If students are not reading in school—and not reading beyond it—then the question becomes not only *where have all the readers gone*, but what conditions are necessary to bring them back. It is within this space that the concept of wild reading emerges—not as a scheduled activity, but as a way of positioning reading as a lived, meaningful practice within and beyond the classroom.

The implications of this shift extend beyond academic outcomes. Engagement with reading provides opportunities for individuals to encounter diverse perspectives, interpret others' emotions, and make sense of the world through sustained interaction with text (Louie, 2005). Research suggests that reading—particularly engagement with narrative texts—supports the development of empathy and perspective-taking by allowing readers to experience the thoughts and feelings of others. When these opportunities are diminished, the effects are not limited to literacy achievement, but extend to how individuals understand, relate to, and engage with others in a diverse and interconnected society. These concerns are particularly significant for students from historically marginalized communities, for whom access to diverse and representative texts plays a critical role in the development of identity, belonging, and engagement as readers (Bishop, 1990). Ensuring that all students have opportunities to see themselves reflected in texts—and to encounter perspectives beyond their own—is essential to fostering both individual growth and collective understanding. In this way, the question *Where have all the readers gone?* is not only about declining engagement, but about what may be lost when reading no longer serves as a bridge between individuals, communities, and ways of understanding the world.

Classroom Environments Where Wild Reading Lives

I think about the classrooms I have walked into over the years—some filled with energy, conversation, and curiosity, and others quiet, orderly, teacher-driven, and efficient. In which of these spaces does reading truly take hold? In classrooms where reading thrives, conversations about books are a natural part of the day. Children view themselves as readers, eagerly offer suggestions about what to read next, and engage with texts in ways that extend beyond assigned tasks. In these spaces, reading is not contained within a lesson—it is lived within the classroom community.

These differences point to the role of the classroom environment in literacy development, more specifically, to what DeVries and Zan (2003) describe as the sociomoral atmosphere of the classroom. The sociomoral atmosphere reflects the norms, relationships, and shared expectations that shape how individuals interact, participate, and make meaning within a learning community. In literacy contexts, this atmosphere influences not only how students engage with texts, but how they come to see themselves and others as readers.

From a constructivist perspective, learning is inherently social. Drawing on the work of Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978), DeVries and Zan (2003) argue that classrooms should be structured to support autonomy, collaboration, and mutual respect, positioning children as active participants in their learning. Within this context, student agency refers to students' capacity to make meaningful choices, take ownership of their learning, and actively shape their engagement with texts and classroom experiences. In such environments, students are not passive recipients of instruction, but contributors to a community of learners—one in which dialogue, perspective-taking, and shared inquiry are central.

At the beginning of the school year, the teacher plays a critical role in establishing this sociomoral atmosphere; however, this influence is intentionally fluid. As students assume increasing responsibility—through structures such as the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983)—the classroom becomes increasingly their own. It evolves into a space where students take risks, learn from one another, and engage in meaningful conversations about texts and ideas.

This perspective aligns with Miller's (2014) assertion that when we teach and assess reading, we cannot overlook the emotional and relational dimensions that sustain lifelong reading. Yet these elements are often minimized in instructional decision-making, in part because they resist easy measurement.

Adults intuitively understand this connection: when we feel unsafe, disconnected, or unseen, our ability to focus diminishes. For children, the classroom environment becomes the primary space where belonging, safety, and engagement are either cultivated or constrained (Vygotsky, 1978; Wigfield et al., 2016). While Science of Reading initiatives ensure access to foundational skills, the sociomoral atmosphere of the classroom shapes whether students take up those skills in meaningful ways—whether they participate, persist, and ultimately see themselves as readers (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016).

Miller (2014) reminds us that while standards and learning targets define what must be taught, teachers—alongside their students—construct the classroom environment. Interactions between teachers and students shape a climate that supports both academic learning and social-emotional development. This insight is especially relevant within Science of Reading–aligned classrooms. Structured literacy does not require sterile environments; rather, it is most effective when implemented within spaces that invite risk-taking, discussion, and curiosity. Reading development emerges through the integration of skills, language, and context—not through rigid or decontextualized instructional approaches (Seidenberg et al., 2020).

When classroom environments prioritize compliance over meaning, opportunities for authentic engagement diminish—what Gallagher (2010) describes as "readicide," or the erosion of students' motivation and engagement with reading. In contrast, classrooms grounded in a strong sociomoral atmosphere position students as capable, valued participants in a community of readers. It is within these environments that wild reading becomes possible—not as an isolated practice, but as a natural extension of belonging, agency, and sustained engagement with text.

This perspective directly informs my own approach to teaching. While Science of Reading initiatives provide essential guidance on what to teach, teachers play a critical role in shaping how that instruction is enacted in practice. The sociomoral atmosphere should not be an add-on, but a foundational component of learning. In this way, effective literacy instruction is defined not only by what is taught, but by the environments in which learning is made possible.

Wild Reading as a Philosophy—Not a Time Slot

If classroom environments shape whether reading lives or fades, then the question becomes not only what we teach, but how we position reading within the day. I find myself wondering how reading has become something we schedule rather than something we live. In many classrooms, extended literacy blocks are filled with carefully sequenced tasks yet offer limited opportunities for authentic engagement with rich texts, student choice, voice, or the joy that emerges from meaningful connections to what is read. When did reading shift from a lived, meaningful experience to something contained within instructional routines only?

This distinction highlights an important misconception in literacy instruction. Wild reading is not a discrete activity or time slot, but a broader philosophy that shapes how reading is positioned within the classroom (Miller, 2014). Rather than being confined to a designated block, wild reading reflects the conditions under which students experience reading as meaningful, self-directed, and connected to their lives beyond school.

This shift raises an urgent question: are we preparing students to read within the classroom, or to read beyond it—into what Miller (2014) describes as reading "in the wild"? The International Literacy Association (2018) warns that reading as a leisure activity may "virtually disappear" if these trends continue (p. 2). While Science of Reading initiatives have strengthened foundational skill instruction (Petscher et al., 2020), they do not, on their own, ensure that students develop the desire to read independently. Without intentional attention to access, choice, and engagement, we risk preparing students to read without cultivating lifelong readers.

Within Science of Reading conversations, wild reading is sometimes positioned as enrichment—or even as a distraction from explicit instruction. Miller (2014) challenges this

framing, urging educators to examine whether reading initiatives support or hinder the development of wild reading habits. Students must learn to make their own reading plans, reflect on their accomplishments, and find personal reasons for reading—otherwise, they will not become wild readers.

From this perspective, wild reading is best understood not as a scheduled block of time, but as a classroom-wide approach that shapes how reading is experienced (Miller, 2014). Rather than standing in opposition to the Science of Reading, it represents a natural outcome of effective instruction. Students must first learn how reading works (Petscher et al., 2020), but they must also develop reasons for engaging with reading beyond instructional contexts (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016). This distinction reinforces the role of motivation and agency as essential components of reading development—not as add-ons, but as outcomes that support sustained engagement. In this way, wild reading is not something extra we make time for, but something that emerges when the conditions for meaningful engagement are intentionally designed.

What resonates most strongly is Miller's modeling of herself as a reader. By openly sharing her reading goals, challenges, and evolving preferences, she invites students into her thinking (Miller, 2014). This "living out loud" positions the teacher as a more knowledgeable other, modeling reflection, persistence, and authenticity. In doing so, students learn not only *how* to read, but *why* readers read.

This kind of modeling extends beyond formal instruction and is often reflected in small, meaningful interactions that shape how students experience reading. I am reminded of a moment from my own childhood. One summer, I received a postcard from a teacher recommending a book she thought I would enjoy. I remember the feeling of being seen—not as a student completing an assignment, but as a reader with preferences and interests that extended beyond the classroom. I sought out the book, read it, and loved it. This simple gesture reinforced that reading was not confined to school but lived in the spaces between—in moments of curiosity, connection, and choice.

These experiences highlight an important consideration: if wild reading is shaped by how reading is positioned within the classroom, it is equally dependent on whether students have access to the texts and experiences that make reading possible.

Reading in the Wild: Access, Libraries, and Equity

I think back to moments in my classroom when a read-aloud didn't end with the final page but instead sparked something more. I found myself sharing my own excitement about the story—talking about the author, wondering aloud what might happen next, and inviting students into that curiosity with me. Students leaned forward, asked for more, and began to seek out similar books on their own. It was in these moments that reading extended beyond the lesson—when curiosity and enthusiasm took hold and students began to carry reading with them.

These moments highlight an important truth: access to texts alone is not enough—students must also be invited into reading in ways that spark curiosity and sustained engagement. At the same time, access remains a critical foundation. Research linking access to texts with reading achievement is substantial (Allington, 2011; Wigfield et al., 2016). Without access, the conditions necessary for meaningful reading experiences cannot exist.

Yet well-organized, inviting classroom libraries are increasingly rare in many classrooms (Allington, 2011; Gallagher, 2010; International Literacy Association, 2018). Books are often stored rather than curated, and opportunities for self-selected reading are limited. Teachers frequently report having limited time for both independent reading and read-alouds, positioning these practices as enrichment rather than essential components of literacy instruction. As instructional time becomes increasingly constrained by content coverage and standardized test preparation, these

foundational experiences are often pushed aside—despite the International Literacy Association's (2018) assertion that they are essential, nonnegotiable components of every child's right to read.

These patterns raise important questions about who has access to meaningful reading experiences—and under what conditions. This question carries significant equity implications. For many students—including those from historically marginalized communities—access to books, time for reading, and opportunities to engage with meaningful texts are not guaranteed outside of school (Allington, 2011; International Literacy Association, 2018). When classrooms do not provide these experiences, disparities in both reading achievement and reading engagement are likely to widen.

Bishop (1990) reminds us that books serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors—allowing readers to see themselves, encounter others, and step into new perspectives. Without access to diverse and representative texts, students may struggle not only to develop as readers, but to see reading as relevant to their lives and identities.

In contrast, wild reading—supported by rich classroom libraries, intentional read-alouds, and opportunity to read whole books—creates more equitable opportunities for students to engage deeply with connected ideas, topics, and genres. These experiences not only build background knowledge but also foster motivation and engagement (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016), supporting the development of readers who not only *can* read, but *choose* to read.

And yet, even in classrooms where books are present, readers do not always emerge. Access creates possibility, but it does not guarantee engagement. The critical work, then, lies in how access is activated—through invitation, interaction, and the intentional design of reading experiences that position students as participants in a community of readers. This raises a central question: what does it take to move from access to experience—to foster readers who not only can read, but choose to read?

Becoming—and Teaching—Wild Readers

I find myself returning to a question that feels both personal and professional: would the students in my care become wild readers because of what I do? If I am honest, the answer is uncertain. When I consider my own development as a reader—shaped so deeply by experiences beyond formal instruction—I wonder whether today's classrooms create similar conditions for the students I teach.

My love of reading did not emerge from instruction alone, but through experiences that allowed me to explore, make choices, and develop a sense of ownership as a reader. Miller (2014) identifies choice as central to cultivating wild readers, emphasizing the importance of discovering preferred authors, genres, and topics. I recall the excitement of discovering books that stretched me as a reader—experiences that were not structured or assessed, yet deeply formative. I felt seen by teachers who recognized my interests and guided me toward texts that both reflected and expanded who I was as a reader.

As a classroom teacher, I have intentionally worked to recreate these kinds of experiences by embedding literature into meaningful, integrated contexts. When stories are introduced with elements of mystery, props, and opportunities for retelling and reinterpretation, engagement deepens. Over time, I developed these text sets—collections of intentionally curated, thematically connected texts and materials—to connect stories, materials, and opportunities for inquiry in ways that invite students into active meaning-making, long before I had a formal name for them. One of my favorite examples is a fairy tale unit that begins with a mysterious letter from a Giant. Each week, new materials and texts are introduced, inviting students to revisit and reimagine familiar stories. These are the experiences students remember—the moments when engagement deepens and reading becomes meaningful. These experiences also shape how I support teacher candidates in

designing literacy-rich environments that extend beyond skill instruction to foster engagement and reader identity.

Yet these reflections point to a persistent tension: despite significant advances in how reading is taught, reading outcomes remain inconsistent at a national level, as reflected in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). When reading is framed primarily as a technical skill—something to be mastered through strategies and assessments—it risks losing its sense of wonder. Students may learn to perform reading, but not to live as readers. This tension reflects broader concerns in literacy research regarding the gap between skill acquisition and sustained reading engagement (Wigfield et al., 2016).

This issue raises an important consideration: will students' reading extend beyond the classroom or remain confined to school contexts, positioned as something to complete rather than something to carry with them? For educators, this question is not simply philosophical—it is instructional. It asks us to consider not only how we teach reading, but how we design experiences that invite students to become readers in ways that endure beyond the classroom.

Reader Identity, Relationships, and Teacher Practice

I think back to the teachers and the books that shaped me—not just what was taught, but how those experiences came together. Teachers who noticed my interests guided me toward books with rich characters and diverse settings—stories that stayed with me, expanded my understanding of the world beyond my own borders, and, in turn, deepened my understanding of myself as a reader. I find myself wondering: who would I have become without these experiences?

This reflection highlights the role of relationships in shaping reader identity. Miller (2014) emphasizes that students' preferences provide a starting point for building meaningful reading relationships. By offering texts aligned with students' interests, teachers build confidence; over time, deeper knowledge of students allows educators to extend and challenge their reading identities.

This idea resonates deeply with my own development as a reader. While my parents encouraged reading, it was a fifth-grade teacher—Miss Firestone—who truly changed my trajectory. I was a strong but quiet student. Although I performed well academically, it was in her classroom that I felt genuinely seen. She took the time to know me not simply to build a relationship, but to teach me—to stretch me, challenge me, and guide me beyond my comfort zone. After her class, I believed in myself in a way I had not before.

This experience continues to shape how I understand relationships in schools. Relationship-building is often emphasized, yet it can become superficial when disconnected from instruction. Relationships matter not as an end in themselves, but as a foundation for responsive teaching. When teachers understand students' motivations, interests, and learning patterns, they can design environments and experiences that foster both growth and engagement (Taboada Barber & Klauda, 2020; Wigfield et al., 2016).

Seen through this lens, reader identity develops at the intersection of motivation, meaningful relationships, and engagement. Reader identity can be understood as how individuals perceive themselves as readers—including their sense of competence, value for reading, and beliefs about their engagement with texts over time (Wigfield et al., 2016). When a teacher takes the time to recommend a book based on a child's interests, the message is clear: you are a reader, and your preferences matter. This positions students as active participants in their learning—a shift that is central to the development of wild readers (Miller, 2014).

These ideas also connect to teacher identity and reflective practice. Miller (2014) argues that effective teaching is grounded in core beliefs and that reflection must serve as a tool for recalibration rather than compliance. Similarly, Thøgersen (2009) describes personal norms as deeply internalized

obligations shaped through reflection. When teachers act in alignment with these beliefs, they experience coherence and professional agency; when they do not, dissonance emerges.

In the context of literacy instruction, this disconnect has become increasingly visible. As educators navigate Science of Reading initiatives, they may perceive that their beliefs about relationships, engagement, and child-centered learning must be set aside in favor of structured, evidence-based practices (Petscher et al., 2020). For many, this is not simply an instructional challenge, but a question of professional identity.

However, this perceived divide presents a false choice. Science of Reading initiatives provide the essential foundation for literacy instruction, ensuring that students develop the skills necessary to access text (Petscher et al., 2020). At the same time, a "reading in the wild" philosophy attends to the development of the whole reading self—centering motivation, identity, and the conditions that sustain engagement beyond the classroom (Miller 2014: Wigfield et al., 2016).

When viewed together, these approaches are not in opposition but mutually reinforcing. Science of Reading builds the skills necessary for reading; however, without attention to the whole reading self, those skills may remain unused or disconnected from meaningful engagement. Opportunities for choice, meaningful text experiences, and responsive relationships create the conditions in which reading is not only learned, but lived (Miller, 2014; Wigfield et al., 2016). In this way, fostering wild readers is not an alternative to Science of Reading, but an outcome of it—one that depends on intentional attention to both skill development and the environments in which reading lives.

For teacher candidates and practicing educators alike, fostering wild readers requires more than implementing strategies—it requires clarity about one's beliefs about children, reading, and the purpose of literacy instruction. In this way, the development of reader identity is inseparable from the development of teacher identity.

Ultimately, the promise of the Science of Reading is not only that students learn to read, but that they come to live as readers. When skill development is paired with attention to motivation, identity, and meaningful engagement, literacy instruction moves beyond proficiency toward purpose. When opportunities for meaningful reading are diminished, the implications extend beyond literacy outcomes to how individuals understand and relate to others in a diverse and interconnected society. Reclaiming this balance may be one of the most important steps educators can take—not only to support literacy development, but to ensure that reading endures as a meaningful, humanizing practice in the lives of students—and in the society they will shape.

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ON THE QUESTION OF ETHICAL APPLICATION OF LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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Abstract
This reflective essay describes a year-long inquiry into the ethical and pedagogical implications of large language models (LLM) in secondary English classrooms. Written from the perspective of a National Writing Project participant, it traces the author's initial skepticism—rooted in concerns about plagiarism and the exploitation of creative labor—toward a more nuanced exploration of teacher-facing and student-facing applications. Practical examples include lesson planning, communication, and AI-assisted feedback, alongside cautions about authenticity, privacy, and overreliance. The article emphasizes the importance of preserving the drafting process as a space for reflection, discovery, and voice development, while considering AI's potential role in brainstorming, revision, and professional workload reduction. Drawing from interviews with writers and creatives, it also situates classroom use of AI within broader cultural debates about originality, commodification, and the value of human imperfection in art. Ultimately, the inquiry reframes the guiding question—*Can LLMs support writing instruction in ways that do not harm creativity or authenticity?*—as an ongoing challenge requiring both ethical discernment and a commitment to student-centered practice.

Keywords: artificial intelligence in education; large language models; writing instruction; National Writing Project; creativity; authenticity; teacher workload; student voice; ethics; educational technology

Introduction

Last fall I joined a cohort of educators exploring AI and classroom applications as part of the National Writing Project (NWP), specifically the NWP Midwest Teacher Initiative's Teaching in the Age of AI. This cohort included teachers and instructors at all levels of education, all interested in better understanding what impacts Large Language Models (LLM) and text-generative technology would have on the classroom.

One thing we all had in common is a belief in the power of writing, both from a student perspective and from a teacher perspective. As members of various chapters of the NWP, we've all sought professional development that leads to better writing instruction in the classroom. We've also all experienced the power of writing in our own lives.

My participation was voluntary and by invitation from the Flint Hills Writing Project (FHWP). I received no financial compensation for my participation. I did receive a review copy of a

text, which I've discussed on my blog and shared my feedback. We were asked to consider ways in which we might share our exploration and insight with a wider audience. I chose to post monthly (or bimonthly when my schedule allowed) on this blog: https://aprilplayswithai.wordpress.com/.

The cohort met once a month via Zoom to engage in discussion and collaboration, and regularly shared insight. Some participants have chosen to collaborate on a review article describing experiences and resources, to be published later. In addition, members of the FHWP (of which I am a member) will meet in person for panel discussions and presentations of our research in September.

As a culmination of my own inquiry project, I've decided to summarize and review experiences here. Rather than simply re-printing elements of the blog, I'll attempt to answer the inquiry question that I explored over these months. In full transparency, this is not an end for me in this exploration. The more I uncover and explore, the more questions I have about classroom applications. I want to reflect on my own deepening understanding of AI, and specifically LLMs.

This article will function as a practitioner piece, rather than a summative review of research. While I certainly employed some elements of qualitative research, especially when I engaged in dialog with Wichita creatives, I've used no systematic coding or review process of those interview responses, but rather a holistic approach to capture a greater understanding of how AI is *perceived* by those creatives who may be directly impacted or feel particularly threatened by its advent. I'm so grateful that they were willing to engage with me in this way; I've included a full list of those creatives and teachers who responded to my interview questions at the end of the article.

I read many, many books and articles. I've tried to keep track. I've created a reference page and appendices. These articles influenced my thinking and my own critical development. There has been an explosion of classroom resources over the last two years (specifically since OpenAI launched ChatGPT publicly). And most of it seems to encourage teachers to embrace all aspects of AI support into their teaching. This is not a position I readily adopt. If anything, the jump to utilize AI without reflection makes me leery.

Conversely, despite what I refer to as the AI Goblin Origin Story, I'm not against LLMs and their use as productivity tools. But I have established my own criteria and reached a measure of comfort after much personal reflection, in how I'd like to see AI used in my own classroom.

I began with the inquiry: *Is there an ethical way to implement AI into the classroom?*

Part 1: The Basics and Reframing the Question

Upon the release of public access to OpenAI's ChatGPT in November 2022, there was a panicked frenzy. Our focus was immediately on misuse, cheating and plagiarism. How were we going to catch kids engaged in academic dishonesty?

I implemented hand-written essays that spring semester to avoid the issue. I acknowledge now that the knee-jerk reaction was based in fear.

In fall 2023, still without exploring, utilizing, or even testing ChatGPT, I led a panel discussion at the annual Kansas Association of Teachers of English conference. And guess what? While a small minority had moved on from the "cheater" discussion, most of the questions were about teaching writing without plagiarism—the magic answer of which was, of course, hand-written essays. (I did especially appreciate the PowerPoint presentation about AI and openly created by AI by Bryan Anderson). And since I'm not a "cheater" and I do my own "thinking," I refused to even dip my toes into the AI pool.

During this, the writing and creative community of which I am a part, was dealing with the ramifications of just *how* ChatGPT had been "taught." I know of more than one writer who discovered that a portion of their intellectual property had been co-opted (I'll speak more to this later), but I can't separate the teacher from the creative, and so I came to the FHWP cohort interested in exploring teaching in the age of AI with my own baggage, fears, and perceptions. I've

tried very hard to put down my own biases, but I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that I am far more concerned with the theft of creative work than I am with students plagiarizing using AI. Students have been cheating in some manner or other and will continue to do so. I can't teach effectively with the mindset that I have a burden to "catch them all." If it's a question of ethics, the first harm is in the devaluation of creative products in order to "teach" an LLM how to create similar products.

That initial question that I had (*Is there an ethical way to implement AI into the classroom?*) needed to become more precise if I was going to explore LLMs with an open mind: Can LLMs support writing instruction in the classroom in a way that does not harm creativity or authenticity?

This question allowed me to release some of my personal trepidation over the AI Goblin Origin story I wrote about in my blog, that AI innovators were feeding a hungry and destructive Audrey II, and instead explore AI applications in a pragmatic way that would directly impact my teaching. Whether I like it or not, there is no escaping AI's impact in the classroom, and we must be ready to face just *how* we're going to approach its use.

Part 2: Teacher-Facing AI

The publishing market is flooded with books on implementing AI, and as a new practitioner, this can be incredibly overwhelming. It's unclear which books truly have good applications, and which are just gimmicky books that feel like they were written by ChatGPT. And by the time these books hit the shelves, they are often outdated. The technology is moving faster than the speed of publishing.

What also was not clear to me was in which ways LLMs could benefit me without replacing me as the facilitator of learning. And let's be clear: there is a political and social push to take out the highly qualified teachers and replace them with someone less qualified and cheaper. There is a distinct impression by many armchair educators that teaching is somewhere between glorified babysitting and fact-regurgitating robotics. When also faced with budget cuts and increased enrollment, many teachers face large, overcrowded classrooms and a lack of support. There's not enough time in this article to address the cultural complexity facing educators today. But some effort must be made to address how AI and LLMs could fit into this environment. Teachers should absolutely feel free to implement assistance in whatever ways are congruent with their district expectations, and their own ethical considerations.

I return to my own question: *Can LLMs support writing instruction in the classroom in a way that does not harm creativity or authenticity?*

Lesson Planning / Alignment

There are many platforms now available, and more developing daily, that allow teachers to type in the learning outcomes, the time frame, and the materials available, and the LLM comes up with a fairly viable plan.

I myself have now used LLMs to create PowerPoint presentations on the following: Understanding Opinion verses Bias; The Biography of Henry David Thoreau, and the Top 5 Things You Can do to Prepare for the AP Language Exam. All required further tweaking and designing on my part, but also incredibly reduced my workload. I've created practice worksheets for a variety of grammar activities, and even used AI to assist me in creating unique writing prompts for creative writing students. The appendix includes a list of currently available apps.

Email / Newsletter / General Communication

Parent/guardian contact and communication is one of those professional expectations that those outside education often forget about. I'm also not suggesting that teachers use LLMs to write

those painful and personal emails when a student is not being successful in the classroom. This is not a substitute for that direct and all-important parent/guardian phone call. However, many of us are expected to write and contribute in some way to regular newsletter or email communication home, and this is where LLMs can reduce workload. In my case, I specifically used ChatGPT. I pasted in the previous week, prompted it to match the tone, structure, and length; then I just listed the specific details I wanted to include for this week.

Professional Development Articles

It is incredibly challenging to be a full-time classroom teacher and also keep up with all of the educational research that is being conducted. The teaching burden is too high. Even with district supported and implemented professional development, it often feels like things are moving faster than we can adapt and adjust. So, we fall back on what we've always done because we know that these practices work, and we know what to expect with outcomes.

Except that the lesson that worked last year may not be as effective or engaging this year. Or we find we want to add another learning objective to a previously attempted lesson, but we're not sure administration would support a curriculum change without data and evidence of success.

Research librarians at Kansas State University were the first to show me programs that actually summarize peer-reviewed articles and research. There are several apps listed in the appendix. At first, I was taken aback. I'm a reader–a good one, enthusiastic, critical, analytical. Why would I do that? I don't want machines to do my thinking for me.

But time is the most crucial commodity that I don't have enough of as a classroom teacher. I tested a couple of these summaries by reading the article for myself first and comparing the notes generated by AI to the notes I generated upon my original read; they did not differ significantly. While time-consuming initially, I have since turned over any number of large-readings tasks to these summary processes and have gained back time.

Part 3: Student-Facing AI

There are some critical pieces to student-facing AI interaction that I, at first, did not understand: Not all LLMs are compliant with FERPA or willing to protect the privacy of your students. Before creating student accounts for anything, first discuss what your district technology expectations are. Students (and frankly many adults) are accessing and using AI applications without even knowing or understanding the implications.

Writing is an incredibly complex cognitive process with many areas in which LLMs can play an assistant role, without fully replacing human creativity and human writing.

Last fall, around the time I was considering my AI inquiry project question, I overheard our building's College & Career Coordinator tell a student to run his college essay through ChatGPT for feedback. I cringed. It was a reflex response, and yet this colleague is one I respect and work closely with. She has a great deal of insight into the college admissions process and has steered many students toward unique and supportive learning opportunities. So, what was my problem with this advice? How was this any different than asking a trusted adult or an English teacher to read over that essay? As I was also in the middle of grading 60 class essays on my own grading pile, I had zero time to offer this particular student assistance.

Of all the academic writing I deal with at the high school level, the college essay is the one many students feel least prepared to tackle. It's tough to identify the qualities of a good college essay, and yet, I know one when I read it. Online advice can often be contradictory as well, with some sites telling students not to reveal too much personal information, and other sites encouraging a kind of vulnerable revelation. A good essay reveals something of the character of the student and shows the potential ways in which they might contribute a unique voice to the wider collegiate learning

community. That authenticity and strength of voice is incredibly challenging to teach and often runs contrary to the analytical essay format valued in history and English disciplines and is certainly the opposite of the objective voice taught in the sciences. The result, then, is that many students spend their last three years in high school doing very little of the kind of personal narrative writing that is so prized in a good college essay. That realization let me to the first way I was considering LLM support of student writing: feedback and revision.

Student Feedback / Student Grading

The biggest hurdle I face as a writing instructor is timely and appropriate feedback that helps young writers grow. I was concerned about utilizing anything that might not match my own rubrics and writing expectations.

There are several apps that allow for submission of classwork, and they align feedback with the teacher's rubric and an expressed set of criteria. But many students are going to be submitting work directly to platforms, and will lack the sophistication in understanding which feedback is useful for incorporation (e.g., yes, you *do* need a comma there), and which might not make for a stronger piece of writing (e.g., replacing the word *momma* with *mother*, even though the original word is far more revealing in its usage and tone for the circumstances of a college essay).

Speaking from one example, I had a class submit a set of 40-minute timed-write essays, based on an AP Language Argument prompt. For those unfamiliar with this essay type, upper-level students, typically juniors, are given a philosophical quote and are asked to support or challenge the quote's argument, based on their own experiences and observations of the world. These essays vary structurally, but must contain a strong thesis, supporting and specific evidence-based examples, and demonstrate strong control over language (e.g., academic vocabulary, conventions). And these essays are written in 40 minutes.

These are arduous. Students learn as much from their mistakes as their successes. By giving them a chance to revise them prior to submission, they get a chance to self-evaluate and strengthen their own writing. In the past, I've done this through a peer-review activity.

Hands down, the AI feedback was more useful than my previous peer-review activities, as far as helping students produce stronger essays. Based on my own control over the rubric and the feedback, they were not told how to fix an issue—only that there was one. They had to determine how to strengthen their logic and reasoning. Part of peer-reviewing is getting the opportunity to see how another student responded to the prompt, and that element was removed from this activity. While I missed the chance for students to see how varied "right" responses could be, on an individual level, this single-handedly may have reduced my reluctance to have AI provide feedback.

I did not have LLMs or AI grade for assessment purposes. It feels, in part, like an abdication of ultimate responsibility. That is one area in which I would like to continue to explore and consider. In the case of this activity, I still graded and evaluated the final submissions based on the very same rubric used to give AI feedback. That question of whether LLMs can support writing instruction in the classroom in a way that does not harm creativity or authenticity, and I did feel this was a positive opportunity.

Student Brainstorming / Prewriting

In a recent Pre-Service Teaching class, one educator told the group that they should consider AI a "Thought Partner." One major challenge that teachers will face is the extent to which they want LLMs used in the completion of learning activities in the classroom. I very much like the idea of a "Thought Partner" and especially appreciated it when a colleague also sent me an acceptable use rubric. Developed and released in April 2024 by the Oklahoma State Department of Education as

part of a guiding document that considers benefits and costs in utilizing AI in the classroom, this rubric gives guidance to both teachers and students.

Figure 1: Acceptable Use Rubric (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2024, p. 8)

	Level of AI Use	Full Description	Disclosure Requirements
0	NO AI Use	This activity is to be completed entirely without AI assistance. AI **MAY NOT** be used at any point during the activity. This level ensures that students rely solely on their own knowledge, understanding, and skills.	No AI disclosure required. May require an academic honesty pledge that AI was not used.
1	AI-Assisted Idea Generation and Structuring	No AI content is allowed in the final submission. AI can be used in the activity for brainstorming, creating structures, and generating ideas for improving work.	AI disclosure statement must be included disclosing how AI was used. Link(s) to AI chat(s) must be submitted with final submission.
2	AI-Assisted Editing	No new content can be created using AI. AI can be used to make improvements to the clarity or quality of student-created work to improve the final output.	AI disclosure statement must be included disclosing how AI was used. Link(s) to AI chat(s) must be submitted with final submission.
3	AI for Specified Task Completion	AI is used to complete certain elements of the task, as specified by the teacher. This level requires critical engagement with AI-generated content and evaluating its output. The student is responsible for providing human oversight and evaluation of all AI-generated content.	All AI-created content must be cited using a proper citation. Link(s) to AI chat(s) must be submitted with final submission.
4	Full AI Use with Human Oversight	Students may use AI throughout the activity to support their own work in any way the educator allows. AI should be a 'co-pilot' to enhance human creativity. The student is responsible for providing human oversight and evaluation of all AI-generated content.	Cite the use of AI using a proper citation. Link(s) to AI chat(s) must be submitted with final submission.

I plan to adapt a version of this to use in my high school English classroom starting in fall 2026. I want to model appropriate and ethical AI use in the pre-writing/brainstorming phase, and in the revision/editing phase. Conversely, I will not allow LLMs to play a direct role in the drafting phase. As a writing instructor, it is my job to build writing competencies, and there are just no shortcuts for this. We can't skip over that marathon training before the big race, any more than we can expect students to write on demand comfortably if we never expect them to write on demand.

There's a further, and far more important reason I'll implement this expectation of the personal draft: writing as discovery. The notion that we do not know what we *think* about something until we *write* about it is not new. But it certainly seems to have fallen out of practice. I have been so focused on teaching students how to create a product, I've forgotten the magic of writing as process, writing as discovery, writing as reflection. Because of that, students have not learned to value their own thinking and their own personal voice. There's also a lack of appreciation for the journey of learning, of gaining new knowledge through a process of consideration and reflection. We are very used to Googling instantaneous answers. And if the recent MIT Media Lab study (Kosmyna et al., 2025) proves to be correct, we don't retain that instantaneous knowledge. Chow (2025) summarized the study in an online *Time* article:

> Researchers used an EEG to record the writers' brain activity across 32 regions, and found that of the three groups, ChatGPT users had the lowest brain engagement and "consistently underperformed at neural, linguistic, and behavioral levels." Over the course of several months, ChatGPT users got lazier with each subsequent essay, often resorting to copy-and-paste by the end of the study.

It comes as no surprise to me that these participants didn't remember what "they" had written since they didn't create the thought connections in the first place.

Evaluation and Assessment of Student Writing

As I mentioned, I am not comfortable leaving the grading and assessment to AI. But I've also been deeply considering my own role as assessor and rubric creator. I often fall back on elements from two different assessment tools: 6+1 Trait Rubric and the AP Language/Literature 6-Point Rubric.

Figure 2: 6+1 Trait Rubric (Education Northwest, 2021)

Trait	**Description**
Ideas	The main message, content, and details that support the topic.
Organization	The internal structure of the piece, including a clear beginning, middle, and end.
Voice	The writer's unique style, tone, and personality that come through in the writing.
Word Choice	The vocabulary used to convey meaning effectively and precisely.
Sentence Fluency	The rhythm and flow of sentences; how well the writing reads aloud.
Conventions	The correct use of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics.
Presentation	The piece is easy to read, polished in presentation, and pleasing to the eye.

Figure 3: A simplified version of the AP Language 6-Point Rubric (College Board, 2019)

Points	**Category**	**Description**
1	Thesis	Clearly states a claim that is arguable and responds to the prompt
1-4	Evidence	Uses appropriate evidence with supporting commentary that clearly supports the thesis and develops a line of reasoning
1	Sophistication	Demonstrates control over language and a sophisticated level of thinking

The issue for me is that neither of these allow for personal connection and reflection in their evaluation, or do they seem to fairly value "voice." In fact, ideas and organization on the 6-traits are usually weighed far heavier on a point scale than the other categories. And while the AP Language rubric asks for a developed line of reasoning, essays feel inherently more organized when students *know* what they think before they start writing and state that thesis early.

So as a next-step element of my own action plan, I will carefully evaluate the writing tasks in my class to deliberately incorporate more reflective writing as practice.

Before moving into Part 4, let me clarify the initial answer to my inquiry question: *Can LLMs support writing instruction in the classroom in a way that does not harm creativity or authenticity?*

Harm seems to come from depriving students the opportunity to practice the drafting process in a meaningful and reflective way. While LLMs can be helpful in the pre-writing or brainstorming phase, it's incredibly important that students draft on their own whenever possible to build up stamina and competency. Feedback and revision can be provided by LLMs, as long as students exercise some understanding and control over tailoring that feedback to meet the rhetorical needs of that specific writing (i.e., ChatGPT doesn't always get the nuance of knowing one's audience).

Part 4: What do Creatives have to say about it?

As my question implies, I place a great deal of inherent value in creativity. Perhaps this comes from the fact that I'm also a practicing creative and have worked as a performer and poet for the last decade. I couldn't escape my need to have these conversations about creativity with others over the course of this inquiry project and found at some point that this exchange started to take precedence over other avenues of exploration. As soon as my peers and colleagues learned I was exploring AI, they went out of their way to engage with me and share their feelings. At some point, I felt the need to streamline this process so that I was more consistent in the questions I asked, and I wanted a way to keep a record of their responses and share them with a wider audience.

Let me back up. While I focused on LLMs and prompt-based AI for classroom application, in terms of the creative fields, AI is the reason for the Hollywood Writers Strike in 2023 (Wong, 2023). The fears of creative work being stolen or the work of legitimate creatives being replaced by computer-generated material is valid. Considering issues like the Spines publishing company and their mission to release 8,000 AI-generated books in 2025 (Battersby, 2024), artists are facing real threats. George R.R. Martin, John Grisham, Jodi Picoult, and many other writers filed a class-action lawsuit against OpenAI in September of 2023 (Madigan, 2024). Comedian Sarah Silverman also sued OpenAI for copyright infringement (Madigan, 2024). In the meantime, over 10,000 authors signed an open letter calling on AI industry leaders to obtain consent and compensate writers for the use of their work (Wong, 2023). OpenAI responded by creating an OptOUT option for users to choose not to have their data utilized in training models (Madigan, 2024). As corporations imply that artists overvalued their work, this further diminishes the claims, fears, and concerns of creatives.

The Big Picture from the creative interview pool:

Across these five interviews and my own blog posts documenting this inquiry project (Pameticky, n.d.), a deeply nuanced and often impassioned conversation emerged around creativity, discipline, and the role of AI in writing. One shared theme is the importance of sustained creative practice and discipline. Nearly all creatives, whether traditionally published or self-starting, emphasized the value of showing up regularly to the page, embracing imperfection, and trusting the long arc of their development. Creativity, for them, was not a lightning bolt but a cultivated habit. This ties directly into another common thread: the rejection of writing as a passive or commodified act. These artists resist the idea that writing is merely output; instead, they view it as emotional labor, cognitive effort, and deep personal engagement.

A particularly forceful point of agreement concerns AI as a threat to originality and human uniqueness. While a few participants offered cautious acknowledgment that AI might serve utilitarian functions (editing, organization, accessibility), the dominant view was one of suspicion or outright hostility.

AI is widely perceived not only as artistically insufficient but as a mechanism of capitalist commodification, a viewpoint that I am coming to share. Its regular use tends to flatten prose, erase individuality, and reward mediocrity. AI represents a dangerous intrusion into a space that has always been deeply, idiosyncratically human.

Connected to this is the fear of homogenization and loss of voice. Writers like Jason Quinn Malott argue that the overuse of AI tools in publishing has already started to genericize literary voice, prioritizing readability and profitability over originality or emotional impact. Others echoed similar concerns, describing AI as a tool that makes writing easier at the cost of complexity, depth, or surprise. This concern also surfaces in conversations about education and access: several interviewees were skeptical or outright critical of using AI as a writing aid in the classroom, arguing that it short-circuits the process by which students learn to think critically and write with purpose.

Another recurring theme is resistance to automation in the creative process. Most writers felt strongly that automation has no place in the soul of creative work. While some acknowledged the role of technology in revising or organizing, they drew a clear line at content generation, seeing it as a violation of the artistic struggle that gives writing meaning. Related to this is a broader philosophical belief in the imperfection and vulnerability of human expression as essential to art. References to concepts like "wabi-sabi" and personal anecdotes about emotional roughness in voice or prose reinforced the belief that human flaws are not failures but features of true creative work.

Several voices also touched on the danger of AI-generated content flooding markets and displacing human labor, particularly in the context of digital publishing. Jason Quinn Malott references Clarkesworld's shutdown in response to AI submissions as a harbinger of worse things to come, where novelty and human distinctiveness are drowned by algorithmic content farming.

Finally, there is a strong sense that art is not just about content or execution—it is about ethics, humanity, and resistance. Whether through outright rejection of AI tools or by emphasizing the irreplaceable aspects of creative consciousness, these writers present art as a defiant, necessary act of being human in the face of automation and economic pressure.

Selected Quotes Revealing Shared Attitudes:

On the value of human imperfection:
"Writing is an art, an act of perfectly flawed, beautiful human striving." – *Jason Quinn Malott*
"Sometimes, a messy paragraph is where your voice lives. Clean it too much and you wash it away." – *Luann Fox*

On AI flattening or replacing originality:
"AI isn't a threat to originality: it's the death of originality." – *Jason Quinn Malott*
"It's not helping you write—it's helping you repeat. That's the difference." – *Gretchen Cassel Eick*

On creativity as a form of discipline:
"I get up every morning and put ass-in-chair for at least an hour, and I've been doing that for twenty-eight years." – *Jason Quinn Malott*
"Writing is like tending a garden—you water it every day or it dies." – *HB Berlow*

On resisting commodification of writing:
"Creative writing has never been fundamental… storytelling is fundamental to the human spirit." – *Jason Quinn Malott*

"If it's just for profit, it's not art. It's marketing." – *Taiomah Rutledge*

On AI and education:
"Before students can use AI, they need to learn critical thinking skills … otherwise, the chatbots will end up using the students." – *Jason Quinn Malott*
"If AI writes the essay, then the student didn't think. And that's the point." – *Gretchen Cassel Eick*

On technology's ethical implications & resisting cultural laziness:
"AI doesn't enhance or diminish human creativity: it diminishes humanity itself." – *Jason Quinn Malott*
"What the fuck is a reluctant writer?" – *Jason Quinn Malott*
"Not everyone should write a novel. That's OK. But don't fake it with prompts and a bot." – *Luann Fox*

Part 5: Conclusion and discussion of Implications

The writing and general collection of information for this predated the release of MIT's fascinating study on cognitive capacity and the impact of the use of ChatGPT over a period of time (Chow, 2025; Kosmyna et al, 2025). I believe that study, which has entered the public pop-culture discourse, will not be the last study of its kind, and will be the underpinning to potential shifts in the enthusiasm for embracing AI's use in the classroom.

Classroom writing instruction must fundamentally change, moving away from a product-based essay model, toward a reflective practice that values voice and critical thinking: essentially, show *how* you know what you know, rather than just showing *what* you know. And any NWP teacher will say that this is not actually a new idea, but AI is forcing the issue. Teachers need tools that allow for and account for AI-modeled use to help students understand ethical use in completing assignments. Teachers also need support in shifting activities and lesson plans *away* from previous learning models.

Teachers must differentiate between different types of cognitive load tasks so that students understand the relevance of struggling to develop a unique and valued voice. Culturally, we as consumers of creative output will need to be incredibly mindful about what kinds of art we wish to invest in. We may very well come to value the flawed over the flat pristine. As consumers, it would be helpful if products came with identifying labels as to the percentage or the ways in which LLMs were used in the drafting process.

Moving forward, I am interested in how my students feel about LLMs and AI, and have recently conducted informal surveys measuring their attitudes. Addressing that question, "Can LLMs support writing instruction in the classroom in a way that does not harm creativity or authenticity?" I have not arrived at a definitive answer, only more questions. I believe that creativity and authenticity are only possible when the human element is centered in the process, and I plan to move forward this year with more exploration of AI applications in a student-centered manner.

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AI and LLM Apps

Several AI programs excel at summarizing peer-reviewed articles:

1. QuillBot offers a free and user-friendly summarization tool with both key sentence and paragraph modes.
2. Scribbr provides an AI-powered academic writing assistant with a summarization feature.
3. Jasper AI is another strong option, particularly for those seeking a versatile and effective summarization tool.
4. Gemini stands out for its multimodal understanding, processing text, images, and charts within research papers.
5. Other notable tools include SMMRY, Notta, and Wordtune.

Here are additional sources to consult:

- Critical AI Literacy for Educators, curated by Kansas University's Kathryn Conrad and Sean Kamperman
- Educator's Technology
- Cult of Pedagogy: Technology

Creative Participants

Participants	Expertise	Interview Process	Final Publication Format
HB Berlow	Crime fiction author and podcaster	Informal discussion Email discussion	Interview blog
Taiomah Rutledge	Indigenous artist and creative; community activist	Informal discussion Email discussion	Interview blog
Gretchen Cassell Eick	Near-future fiction author and professional historian	Book talk on *Resistance* In-person interview Email discussion	Guest blog / article
LuAnn Fox	Veteran educator and literacy specialist	Email questionnaire	Interview blog
Jason Quin Malott	Literary fiction author and culture critic	Email questionnaire	Interview blog

Generative AI disclosure statement: The abstract was generated by ChatGPT on September 16, 2025, based upon the following prompt: *create an abstract of no more than 200 words, and a list of key words for this article*. ChatGPT was also used to synthesize the thematic elements of five interviews conducted for the "Big Picture from the creative interview pool" section of this article. No other use of AI, LLMs, or other artificially generated thought-partners were used in the direct authorship or revision of this article.

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Mother, wife, teacher, poet. April Pameticky shares time between roles as public school educator at the largest high school in the state of Kansas, and peer facilitator within the creative community of artists and writers in Wichita. She launched the *Wichita Broadside Project* and has served as editor of *Voices of Kansas*, an online poetry journal focused on the youth of Kansas, sponsored by the Kansas Association for Teachers of English, for which she has also served as a board member since 2013, and currently serves as Vice President. She is currently a doctoral student at Kansas State University, studying teacher efficacy and the advent of AI technology as it affects writing pedagogy and methods. Her latest poetry collection *with concern for how words land in the body* will be released June 2026 from Spartan Press. April can be reached at aspameticky@gmail.com, @aprilinwichita, and https://aprilpameticky.com.

CREATING CONFIDENT READERS AND WRITERS IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM

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Abstract
Given the unilateral push towards deploying the Science of Reading in the K-12 classroom, understanding the benefits of programs like Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) can help educators make decisions about how they can best support all types of learners. This reflective essay reports on interventions used with two high school seniors receiving special education services. It explains how LETRS principles were applied in the classroom to address decoding, morphology, vocabulary, comprehension, and composition deficits. It documents instructional adjustments, challenges, successes, and future instructional plans, and argues for the value of structured literacy and morphology-focused vocabulary study in the secondary special education classroom.

Keywords: structured literacy, Science of Reading, reading intervention, special education, LETRS

Introduction

With literacy rates declining over the past several decades (Harris, 2025), America finds itself in a concerning position. Rapid advances in technology and media dissemination require citizens to be savvier than ever when it comes to reading and comprehending the information that flows ceaselessly; what once came in trickles now comes in overwhelming deluges. Yet, many modern students continue to fall behind on the literacy front, at risk of becoming disengaged in learning and more prone to leading a life of underperformance. Such students will be "disadvantaged in twenty-first-century society," as careers demand more competencies associated with advanced literacy skills, such as critical thinking, high-level analysis, and composition (Moats & Tolman, 2019, p. 4). To assist students in developing these necessary skills, educators can turn to intensive reading courses such as Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), developed by Louisa Moats and Carol Tolman, to learn more about how students learn to read, the barriers students face when encountering reading, and how to implement strategies that will help struggling students find literacy success.

Reading and writing are foundational academic skills that contribute to academic success, civic engagement, and sustainable lifelong learning. To fully engage in the secondary curriculum, these skills must be automatic; however, this automaticity is often erroneously assumed by teachers. Many students arrive in high school lacking mastery of these literacy foundations, which causes them to fall behind their peers and disengage from the academic process. For these students, strategic and proven strategies are required to help them make meaningful steps towards mastery and ultimately gain fluency in their comprehension and writing.

Student Profiles and Initial Assessments

I worked with two high school students, whom I will refer to as Eli and Martin. Both were seniors receiving special education services for reading and written language. Eli, 18, was diagnosed with dyslexia at age nine, but moved schools frequently during his elementary years and never received consistent interventions. He demonstrated strong oral language and critical thinking skills. Eli revealed in an initial interview that he had not received much formal instruction on composition, instead focusing solely on foundational skills. He had also never engaged in deep word studies (morphologies, etymologies, etc.). He excelled at discourse and forming complex thoughts when instruction was delivered verbally; however, he struggled to decode multisyllabic words. Assessment of his writing revealed a gap in his phoneme-grapheme correspondence, typical of students with dyslexia (Moats & Tolman, 2019, p. 55).

Martin, 18, lacked many foundational reading skills, which aligned with his specific learning disability in the area of processing speed. His reading fluency hovered around the late 4th/early 5th grade level, and he struggled to store and retrieve information from longer, more complex texts. He excelled at decoding sight words but struggled with unfamiliar multisyllabic words. His spelling also revealed a misunderstanding of phonemes, as we often attempted to spell out words with little success (e.g *favret* for *favorite*). Martin noted that he had not been expected to write anything over a page until his sophomore year of high school. He had also never internalized the benefits of learning the roots and origins of words to assist with conjunctions and spelling.

Despite the two students differing in their abilities and needs, they both lacked consistent reading and writing instruction throughout their elementary and middle-grade years. Completing LETRS and the Bridge to Practice activities helped me see that these areas are not a collection of disparate skills, but rather a cohesive set of masteries that come together to allow students to comprehend and compose competently. Additionally, utilizing the specific tools presented in the unit allowed me to better speak with parents, guardians, and general education teachers about how to better accommodate and intervene with students in the classroom. Practice and application of the principles allowed me to see success in all my students, regardless of their abilities.

Applying LETRS Principles

I decided the best approach for Eli would be to focus on explicit instruction in syllable types, syllable division, and morphology. This is done using a multi-sensory approach, borrowed from some leftover materials I found in a discarded *Take Flight* toolkit in my classroom closet. We spent the first few sessions getting familiar with how each letter sounds in our mouths, looking at printouts, and using a mirror so Eli could see how his tongue moved in his mouth. We practiced dividing some of the Tier 2 vocabulary from his government class—pulling double-duty as a study aid—to see how the parts of each word fit together. Eli also helped me create some morphology games that we played with the rest of my English class.

Martin's needs led me to believe that he would benefit from targeted instruction on phoneme-grapheme mapping and CVC/CVCE (Consonant-Vowel-Consonant / Consonant-Vowel-Consonant-e) patterns. He had an interest in the etymology of words after we related it to his love of Greek mythology, so finding ways to break apart multisyllabic words into their roots was helpful. Daily practice with morphing words and manipulating blends became part of the two hours I had with Martin.

I used to rely on traditional vocabulary exercises: weekly word lists, context clues, and periodic quizzes. Entering the special education classroom, I found that these types of activities were not effective for students like Eli and Martin. Instead, it was a more beneficial approach to vocabulary in the classroom by focusing on depth instead of breadth. By far, the most beneficial strategy for both Eli and Martin was focusing on morphological mapping and semantic networks.

For example, words like *intervene* would be broken into their prefix and root to show the meaningful units of the word. Martin, in particular, loved to come up with long lists of related words (intercept, interfere, etc.). Eli's preferred activity was creating word webs to make correlations between meaning and usage. I used an online vocabulary program called Membean, which featured a similar activity called a word constellation that also piqued his interest. He had extensive background knowledge compared to his peers, which allowed him to generate detailed maps with ease. Eli, whose IEP goal entailed spelling and decoding, became more confident in breaking down and manipulating new words.

In their general education classrooms, both students benefited from cloze sentences and evidence-based writing strategies such as sentence scrambles and kernel sentence expansion. I also pre-taught Tier 2 words from their classes to ensure that they had mastered the words' meanings before encountering them in the context of the curriculum. Ultimately, exposure to words in multiple settings across multiple class periods became the most effective means of helping Eli and Martin gain confidence in their comprehension and composition.

Instructional Adjustments and Challenges During LETRS Implementation

Implementing LETRS in the classroom was difficult for me at first. Initially, I felt overwhelmed by the concepts and terminology that I needed to learn, but when I chunked what I learned into more manageable tools, I started to see some success. By doing short, targeted lessons with my students, I was better able to balance things like planning, grading, and data collection during my workday.

After completing LETRS Volume 1, I discovered how important it is to integrate phonics and morphology instruction into my daily routine. When I introduce vocabulary or answer questions about unfamiliar words for students, these two areas have become a part of my toolbox. I learned how important it is to equip students with an understanding of word families and origins, as well as ensuring that they know how a word's phonemes relate to its encoding. Ultimately, I feel more confident teaching students reading now that I have a deeper understanding of models like the Four-Part Processing Model. With that, I am better able to talk to students, parents, and colleagues about students' needs and how they can be best met.

Martin was also more hesitant than Eli to engage with the interventions. I believe trying new strategies with students who have been identified and received pull-out services for many years can sometimes be met with trepidation. Eli responded to the beginning of the interventions with resistance, noting that it felt like yet another attempt to make him a better reader. I was able to leverage our relationship and the trust I had built with him to help him find some confidence in the system, but I can see how other students his age might meet the program with similar hesitance.

The comprehension problems that both Eli and Martin exhibited were masking deeper foundational deficits with their decoding, encoding, and language skills. Eli has strong oral language skills but struggles to engage with text. Martin had a robust but shallow mental model, making it difficult for him to make inferences and summarize new ideas. I struggled with both students because I was unsure about what to tackle to help navigate their barriers with reading comprehension and composition.

Completing LETRS Unit 6, which focuses on reading comprehension, helped me realize that both students needed to see a clear and digestible model of the reading process. I believe showing them the correlation between word recognition and reading comprehension helped them to develop the buy-in needed to start making meaningful progress. Coming from a general education background, I erroneously assumed that students would have all the necessary tools and understanding to fill their gaps, but I quickly realized that students like Eli and Martin need a clear picture of how their brains take in information and process it for understanding.

One of my most effective tools was incorporating more think-alouds in my lessons. I would try to verbalize what I was visualizing in new ways not present in the text, pause and reflect on confusing passages, or talk about why I thought an author might choose to use one word over another. Martin quickly glommed onto thinking aloud, often volunteering his thoughts when we read together as a class. Eli benefited most from hearing me talk through things like text structures, story grammar, and literary devices, as these sequences and figurative parts of language often confused him when reading independently.

Successes and Future Instruction

Eli's confidence was noticeably higher, especially after a few months of work. I worked with him for two years prior, and this was the first time I had him volunteer to attempt reading aloud in our pull-out class. His decoding ability moved from sight words to tackling multisyllabic words that he was familiar with. This was especially evident with the academic vocabulary that he has extra practice with. Martin's work on CVCe words showed the most improvement, and he was thrilled when he encountered these words and read them with confidence. He also liked helping his classmates break down words, and I had plenty of chances to let him teach the class a small lesson from time to time.

One of the biggest successes for me—which ties perfectly into my future instruction—was my focus on planning. The appendix became a go-to place for me to find targeted resources not only for my case study students, but all the students on my caseload. I was quick to meet with other departments in school to share ways to aid students in composition, which I believe was met with genuine gratitude. My school has 50-minute class periods, which can make it difficult to integrate deep, meaningful comprehension and composition instruction, so simple strategies with big impact are the most effective.

Now that I have finished LETRS training, I feel more confident looking at students' need areas, identifying them, and making a solid plan that I can implement with the support of their parents/guardians and teachers. Graphics like Scarborough's Reading Rope and the Simple View of Reading are now permanently in my IEP folder for meetings. I plan to spend the summer retooling my materials to ensure that I am focusing on morphology and advanced word study throughout. I mostly work with older students, so ensuring that I have access to an abundance of high-interest decodable texts is paramount. I want to intentionally focus on what students need to develop the strategies or automaticity they need to read fluently and confidently.

Moving forward, I will continue focusing on structured writing, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction. I will continue to focus on helping students create rich mental models and schemas that will help them feel less frustrated when approaching reading and writing across disciplines. As a special education teacher, I must advocate for structured literacy instruction in the secondary environment. The second volume of LETRS helped me to understand the importance of utilizing models and language systems, all of which are beneficial for older students to take ownership of their learning.

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https://www.kansasenglish.org/apply-for-awards-scholarships-board-membership.html

ENHANCING WRITING QUALITY IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS: A STUDY OF THE WRITING WITH PURPOSE ROUTINE

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Abstract
Research suggests that students may become more skilled writers when they write for a meaningful purpose (Block & Strachan, 2019). Measures of adolescent writing performance in the U.S. reveal a need for adolescents to improve their writing skills, warranting the exploration of instructional approaches that engage students in writing for meaningful purposes. This study examined the influence of an instructional routine called *Writing with Purpose* on four high school English language arts classrooms in a Midwest U.S. school. Using a pre/post design, 37 student writing samples were evaluated using three validated tools. Results showed statistically significant improvements in paragraph structure and all six traits of writing, with medium to large effect sizes. Findings suggest the *Writing with Purpose* routine may be an effective instructional approach for improving adolescent writing quality.

Keywords: writing instruction, adolescent literacy, motivation, instructional methods

In recent years, research focused on motivation in adolescent learning has highlighted its critical role in engaging adolescents in academic tasks (Louick & Scanlon, 2021). More specifically, there is strong theoretical research indicating that adolescent motivation plays a key role in writing achievement (Wright, 2021), yet there are few studies of interventions that capitalize on incorporating motivating factors into writing instruction. Motivating factors for adolescents include writing self-efficacy (Bruning et al., 2013) and whether students see value in a writing task (Graham, 2018). Adolescents need more authentic writing opportunities that have clear utility in their world both inside and outside of school. However, research connecting this sort of highly motivating authentic writing task with writing achievement has largely been done in younger grades (e.g., Troia, 2013), and more studies are needed to show the impact of highly motivating writing tasks on adolescent students' writing quality.

It is difficult to know precisely the large-scale trends of student writing in the U.S. since the

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has not released a report on writing since 2011 (NCES, 2012). Recent research indicates that educators do believe writing is an increasingly important skill, especially given the complex demands of 21st century communication (Graham, 2018; Deane, 2022). However, large-scale surveys and observational studies show that, despite these beliefs, writing receives relatively little instructional time in K-12 classrooms, and students are given few extended or varied writing opportunities (Applebee & Langer, 2016; Coker et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2023).

Students can become more skilled writers when they write for a meaningful purpose, (Block & Strachan, 2019), but teachers may feel pressure to limit student writing opportunities due to high-stakes testing demands (McMillan, 2005), a limiting philosophy of curriculum scope and sequence in their teaching context, or a myriad of external factors that cause them to "stick to the script" and not explore new ways to engage their students in authentic writing opportunities (Narayanan & Shields, 2024). These recent and growing restrictions on teacher autonomy may be directly impacting students' ability to improve as writers by reducing the number of motivating writing opportunities teachers could facilitate. To test the impact of adolescent writing motivation on adolescent writing quality, we worked with four high school teachers to implement a new writing instructional routine called *Writing with Purpose*.

Background and Theoretical Support for *Writing with Purpose* Routine

This study was designed to measure the influence of a researcher-developed instructional routine called *Writing with Purpose* (WWP) on student writing quality. The WWP routine combines two bodies of work relevant to adolescent writing into a single instructional routine appropriate for broad use in secondary classrooms.

The first body of work informing the WWP routine is the Institute of Education Sciences' (IES) Practice Guide titled *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively*. The Guide outlines three recommendations for teaching secondary students: 1) Explicitly teach appropriate writing strategies using a model-practice-reflect instructional cycle; 2) Integrate writing and reading to emphasize key writing features; and 3) Use assessments of student writing to inform instruction and feedback. The WWP routine aligns with these recommendations by using a model-practice-reflect instructional cycle, asking students to examine and highlight relevant features of models to inform their writing, and by providing time and structure for students to test the effectiveness of their work on readers and reflect on changes that might make their writing more effective.

The routine also builds on these recommendations in several important ways. For example, it draws from research findings that writing for an authentic audience can improve writing quality (Block & Strachan, 2019; Rosen, 1973). Students using the WWP routine test their work with a reader who is representative of their intended audience and use feedback from that reader to inform self-reflection and revision of their work.

Another important component the routine expands upon is explicit instruction, made more accessible for teachers through an instructional sequence called Cue-Do-Review, detailed in the methods section. This instructional sequence is followed in each of the routines that are part of the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM™). SIM instructional tools have been developed and validated by the Center for Research on Learning at the University of Kansas, and they provide a comprehensive approach for improving adolescent and content literacy outcomes (Deshler et al., 2001; Schumacher & Fisher, 2021). SIM includes two arms that work together to improve literacy outcomes: Content Enhancement Routines (CER) and Learning Strategies. CERs are designed to help teachers think about, adapt, and present critical content in a student-friendly manner. They provide guidance for teachers and students to collaboratively construct graphic organizers that improve students' understanding of course concepts and perform higher order thinking and reasoning. The WWP

routine will be part of the SIM suite of resources, and as such, it includes evidence-based structures and practices that are hallmarks of the routines.

The second major body of work informing the WWP routine is adolescent motivation. Human motivation, as a topic of study primarily housed in the field of psychology, is influenced by an abundance of theories and models that help us understand why human beings are compelled to act in a few ways. Recent work by Urhahne and Wijnia (2023) sought to integrate these theories by proposing a basic motivational model through which more specific models could be described. A central premise underlying their model is that "motivated behavior arises from the interaction between the person and the environment" (p. 3). The basic motivational model they propose is as follows: Situation → Self → Goal → Action → Outcome → Consequences. That this model uses situation and self as a starting point makes it especially fitting as a motivational model for adolescents, who are developmentally in a self-focused phase of life (Carvalho & Veiga, 2022; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023). The WWP routine capitalizes on human beings' natural propensity to be driven to action by situations they personally experience. It aligns with this motivational theory by guiding teachers and students through a process of explicitly identifying the situations and environments students engage with frequently, and by helping students explore issues within those situations and environments that they feel compelled to speak about or influence in some way.

Adolescent Writing Performance in the United States

The WWP routine is intended to support teachers in their work to engage adolescents in extended writing experiences, and to provide cognitive supports that can help them become stronger writers. Research on adolescent writing suggests a routine like WWP could address some shortcomings of writing instruction and adolescent writing that have emerged over the last several decades.

One of those shortcomings is simply providing focused instructional time for writing in adolescent classrooms. Research is clear that effective writing skills are critical for students' future success in work and life (Graham & Perin, 2007), but time spent on writing instruction does not reflect this imperative. The time adolescents spend writing during each school day is less than most spend eating lunch or moving from class to class. In a recent study surveying U.S. middle and high school teachers' writing instructional practices through a full school year, teachers reported spending only about 16 minutes per school day engaging students in planning, writing, or revising their writing, though times varied widely (Graham et al., 2025). This study also found that most writing assignments were short and did not require the use of digital tools, a concerning finding considering the growing importance of building competence in the use of digital technologies (Washburn & Myers, 2023).

There are likely several contributing factors to writing instruction only taking place for 16 minutes across adolescents' seven-hour school day. One, students in secondary grades typically see several teachers throughout their school day, and although writing has been found to be an effective tool for engaging students in deeper learning in every content area (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2021), it is typically only a focus in English language arts (ELA) classrooms. Even there, writing is only part of the focus, as ELA teachers are typically required to cover standards in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language.

Another common barrier to students receiving writing instruction is teachers do not feel self-efficacious about teaching writing or impacting student writing, particularly for students who struggle (Poch et al., 2020). This is likely due to teachers receiving little or no preparation in how to teach writing to adolescents (Gillespie et al., 2014), and varying levels of support within their school context for teaching writing (Kiuhara et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2014).

Given these challenging factors, it is not surprising that most of students' school-based writing requires only short responses, and there are significant differences in writing output for students with disabilities and English learners (Wilcox & Jeffrey, 2014). There may, however, be some hope for engaging students in more frequent and lengthier writing by tapping into their propensity to write for non-school purposes. This area of research is closely related to research on digital literacies, because much of students' non-school writing is done via technology-based platforms. Vaughan (2020) suggests it is also an area ripe for study because "despite the breadth of research on out-of-school writing, educators still lack a useful understanding of what this knowledge means for in-school writing instruction and how, if at all, it should be operationalized in classrooms" (p. 529).

Role of Purpose in Improving Writing Instruction and Performance

Given the challenges teachers face in facilitating effective writing instruction, the vast under-instructing of writing across students' school day, and the need to improve students' opportunities to practice and improve their writing, it makes sense to leverage what we know about high-quality instruction as well as students' interests and passions to create a powerful instructional routine to assist educators in their work. *Writing with Purpose* seeks to pull together research on motivation, adolescent literacy development, and adolescent writing into a single instructional routine. Its instructional sequence blends together a basic motivational model (Situation → Self → Goal → Action → Outcome → Consequences; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023), research on adolescent writing motivation (Block & Strachan, 2019; Wright, 2021, Graham, 2018), and evidence-based practices for adolescent writing instruction as outlined in the IES Practice Guide, Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively (Graham et al., 2016). The routine also seeks to present an approach to writing instruction that integrates critical thinking into the writing instructional process, along with components of craft and structure.

Present Study

This study used a single-arm pre/post design to measure differences in writing quality before and after use of the *Writing with Purpose* routine. We expected a difference in mean scores of post-test measures following the use of the routine. Data collection and analysis centered around the research question: Does the *Writing with Purpose* instructional routine improve the quality of student writing?

Methods

The present study used a pre/post design with matched pairs to measure 37 high school students' writing quality on three measures before and after learning the *Writing with Purpose* routine. Data analysis included paired sample t-tests.

Setting and Participants

The study occurred during the 2023–2024 academic year at a Midwestern public high school (grades 9-12) with IRB approval. Four ELA teachers implemented the *Writing with Purpose* routine as part of regular instruction. Researchers analyzed writing from 37 students (ages 14-18) whose caregivers provided consent. Gender and race/ethnicity reporting was optional; of 32 respondents, 65.6% identified as male and 34.3% as female. Twenty-one reported White only, two Native American only, one Hispanic only, and seven as multiracial (combinations of Black, White, Native American, Asian, and Hispanic).

Instructional Intervention

In this study, teachers used the WWP routine to support their students to write a persuasive

piece. The decision to focus on persuasive writing was made by teachers and researchers together as a way to control in part for effects of genre differences on writing performance. The WWP routine consists of seven cognitive strategy steps following a mnemonic "PURPOSE." Each step has its own theoretical base and supporting research, and the mnemonic helps students learn and remember the names of the steps: Step 1. Plan a purpose; Step 2. Understand their intended audience; Step 3. Review models of similar writing; Step 4. Ponder and record model "moves" on a checklist; Step 5. Organize their ideas; Step 6. Scribe their ideas; and Step 7. Evaluate and reflect on the impact of their writing.

Plan a purpose. The first step engages students and teachers in identifying an authentic purpose for writing. Students write more effectively when their work serves a clear purpose (Block & Strachan, 2019). Teachers and students consider: *What do we expect to happen when someone reads this? How will we know it's effective?* Rather than relying on broad genre purposes (e.g., narrative = entertain), this step pushes for specificity.

Understand intended audience. Students consider *For whom am I writing?* Skilled writers anticipate readers' needs and benefit from involving them in revision (Marsh, 2018; Moore & MacArthur, 2012).

Review models. Teachers help students examine mentor texts for structure, tone, and conventions—an evidence-based strategy for adolescent writers (Graham & Perrin, 2007).

Ponder model moves. Students analyze models to answer: *What does this writer do that might work for me?* They record 4-5 moves on a checklist for self-assessment and reflection (Jagaiah et al., 2019).

Organize ideas. Students plan structure by asking: *What should this writing look like? How should it be organized?* Organization should align with purpose and genre (Bazerman et al., 2017). Other Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) routines with graphic organizers aligned to specific types of thinking (e.g., framing main ideas and details; supporting a claim with evidence and reasoning) can support this step (Bulgren et al., 2009).

Scribe ideas. Students draft using their outline and checklist from prior steps.

Evaluate impact. Students test whether their writing achieved its purpose by asking: *Did it work? What's effective and what needs improvement?* This design-based approach addresses concerns about peer review (MacArthur, 2016; Hoyardas et al., 2014; Saddler et al., 2014) and uses authentic readers identified in Step 2 (Hanington, 2003).

The steps are also presented on a graphic organizer called the WWP Guide that teachers co-construct with their students. The WWP guide contains seven sections, each with a prompt to guide students' thinking. The sections are numbered to indicate order of the steps in the routine.

Like other SIM Content Enhancement Routines, the WWP routine follows the Cue-Do-Review instructional sequence to help students and teachers co-construct the WWP Guide using the PURPOSE steps. In the "Cue" phase, the teacher cues the students that the routine will be used, provides an advance organizer showing how the routine will be used and how it will help them, and explains what students are expected to do. In the "Do" Phase, the teacher and students work in partnership to co-construct the WWP Guide. When the WWP routine is complete, the students' completed guides show their plans for what content to include, how to organize their work, and how to assess the effectiveness of their work with authentic readers. All students create their own guides during the lesson and use them as support as they write. In the "Review" Phase of the routine, teachers and students review information that has been covered and discuss how the routine helped students to prepare to write. Any misunderstandings can be clarified and resolved. An instructional guidebook supports teachers to co-construct WWP Guides by providing questioning prompts for each step (Myers & Washburn, In Press).

Procedures

First, participating teachers gave their students a pre-measure persuasive writing prompt. Students submitted their responses through a Qualtrics form. Teachers then watched an overview video about The *Writing with Purpose* Routine. Teachers were provided a guidebook to accompany the video and electronic copies of instructional resources. After watching the overview video, one researcher met with each teacher to confirm their understanding of the instructional procedures and support them to draft their WWP Guide. When teachers were finished with the WWP Guide and before using it with students, they sent their guides to the second researcher to review, provide feedback, and record scores on a fidelity checklist. The fidelity checklist outlined criteria for each component of a WWP Guide. The researcher documented which components were present and correct, present but needed improvement, or not present. The researcher provided descriptive feedback per component to teachers to bring their guides to full fidelity prior to using them with students. Teachers used the WWP routine to guide their writing instruction during seven separate 45-minute class sessions over the course of one month. Written work produced by following the steps of the WWP routine served as a post-measure of student writing performance.

Data Sources

We analyzed student writing samples collected before and after WWP implementation. Teachers administered two argumentative writing prompts: one served as the pre-intervention measure, and the other was used during instruction and evaluated as the post-intervention measure. Prompts were aligned with course content and included an element of student choice. Pre-writing tasks included arguments about literary texts (e.g., "Everyday Use," *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*) and school-based issues. Post-writing tasks included persuasive pieces such as social media campaigns, proposed policy changes, and advocacy for school services.

Student writing was evaluated using three measures: the *Six Traits Writing Rubric* (Education Northwest, 2018), the *Paragraph Writing Score Sheet* (Schumaker & Lyerla, 1993), and the *Sentence Writing Score Sheet* (Schumaker & Sheldon, 2024). The Six Traits Writing Rubric assesses Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions across multiple text types. Each trait is scored on a 1-5 scale, with higher scores indicating greater control and effectiveness. The rubric has demonstrated strong reliability and validity and provides clear criteria for consistent scoring (Arter & McTighe, 2001; Kozlow & Bellamy, 2004; Education Northwest, 2018). The Paragraph and Sentence Writing Score Sheets use explicit scoring procedures with defined criteria. The Paragraph Writing Score Sheet evaluates paragraph structure, coherence, and language features, with mastery defined as earning 80% of possible points. The Sentence Writing Score Sheet evaluates sentence completeness, sentence type, and punctuation accuracy, with mastery levels set at 100% for complete sentences, 50% for complicated sentences, and 66% for internal punctuation accuracy.

Data Analysis

Pre/post writing samples were scored using three evaluation tools with high interrater reliability. Raters were four former teachers, independent from this study, who had prior experience using the measures. Scoring training included evaluating a mock writing sample separately and comparing scores to discuss decision-making for future consistency. Writing samples were submitted according to codes to ensure anonymity. Raters were given all 37 pre/post writing samples to evaluate independently. Scores from each rater were compiled and averaged per category of scores (i.e., key trait or score sheet items). Then, differences between pre/post scores were calculated for each writing sample and category.

To determine effects of the instructional intervention on writing performance, several paired t-tests (Cohen, 1988) were conducted to compare the pre-test and post-test categories of scores for

the writing samples. The sample consisted of 37 participants who completed both the pre-test and post-test writing assignment. The paired t-test compares the mean of two dependent groups, meaning the test compares the results of two different writing samples from the same students. The assumptions met for this test are independent paired samples (i.e., two points of measurement), dependent groups (dependency inside each pair), the population's distribution approaches normal distributions, and there is expected difference between any paired samples. Paired t-test calculations were performed using the web-based calculator available on https://www.statskingdom.com/paired-t-test-calculator.html.

Positionality

As white, cisgender women and career educators with more than two decades of experience supporting adolescents with and without disabilities, we approached this study as practitioner-scholars grounded in inclusive, evidence-based literacy instruction. We work within a sociocultural framework that views literacy as equity-oriented. Our experiences as special education and ELA teachers, instructional leaders, and state-level coordinators shape our belief that knowledge is co-constructed through practice and collaboration. As authors of *Writing with Purpose*, we recognize our dual roles in this research and employed procedures to ensure appropriate safeguards. Also aware of research power dynamics and potential biases, we engaged in reflexivity and centered teacher agency throughout the study.

Results

Results of normality tests on pre- and post-test scores for each writing component skill showed reasonably symmetrical distributions, and the sample size was sufficient (greater than 30) to use the paired t-test. The following results are based on p-values of less than 0.001, which means the chance of type 1 error (rejecting a correct hypothesis) is small. See table 1 for pre/post measurement means per writing component skill.

Table 1: Pre/Post Measurement of Writing Component Skills in the Sample

	Pre-Measure Mean	Post-Measure Mean	Mean Difference
Paragraph Writing	54.8	67.1	12.2973
Sentence Writing: Complete	83.6	88.4	4.7703
Sentence Writing: Complicated	49.4	51.4	2.0135
Sentence Writing: Punctuation	58.4	63.2	4.7568
Six Traits: Ideas	3.4	4.1	0.6892
Six Traits: Organization	3.1	3.9	0.7568
Six Traits: Voice	3.1	4.2	1.1081
Six Traits: Word Choice	3.2	3.7	0.4865
Six Traits: Sentence Fluency	2.9	3.8	0.8776
Six Traits: Conventions	3.2	3.8	0.527

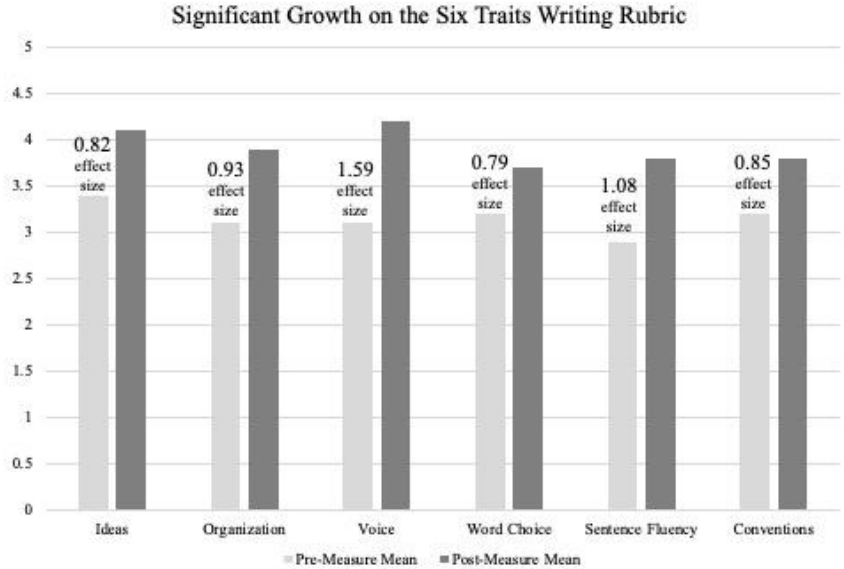
For paragraph structure, as measured with the Paragraph Writing Strategy score sheet, results of the paired-t test indicated that there is a significant medium difference between Group1 (M = 54.8 ,SD = 19.5) and Group2 (M = 67.1 ,SD = 16), t(36) = 3.2, p = .001. The magnitude of effect

for paragraph structure was medium (Cohen's d = 0.52). There were non-significant small differences for sentence structure: complete sentences, complicated sentences, and correct punctuation, as measured by the Sentence Writing score sheet (Schumaker & Sheldon, 1999). For use of complete sentences, results of the paired-t test indicated there was a non-significant small difference between Group1 (M = 83.6, SD = 14.5) and Group2 (M = 88.4, SD = 16.1), t(36) = 1.6, p = .055. For use of complicated sentences, results indicated there was a non-significant very small difference between Group1 (M = 49.4, SD = 20.2) and Group2 (M = 51.4, SD = 20.1), t(36) = 0.5, p = .304. For punctuation usage, results indicated there was a non-significant very small difference between Group1 (M = 58.4, SD = 23.1) and Group2 (M = 63.2, SD = 23.1), t(36) = 0.9, p = .177.

As measured by the Six Traits Writing Rubric, there were medium to large statistically significant differences for ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. For the ideas trait, results of the paired-t test indicated that there was a significant large difference between Group1 (M = 3.4, SD = 0.9) and Group2 (M = 4.1, SD = 0.6), t(36) = 5, p < .001. For the organization trait, results indicated there was a significant large difference between Group1 (M = 3.1, SD = 0.9) and Group2 (M = 3.9, SD = 0.8), t(36) = 5.7, p < .001. For the voice trait, results indicated there was a significant large difference between Group1 (M = 3.1, SD = 0.7) and Group2 (M = 4.2, SD = 0.6), t(36) = 9.6, p < .001. For the word choice trait, results indicated there was a significant medium difference between Group1 (M = 3.2, SD = 0.8) and Group2 (M = 3.7, SD = 0.6), t(36) = 4.8, p < .001. For the sentence fluency trait, results indicated there was a significant large difference between Group1 (M = 2.9, SD = 0.8) and Group2 (M = 3.8, SD = 0.7), t(36) = 6.6, p < .001. Lastly, for the conventions trait, results of the paired-t test indicated that there is a significant large difference between Group1 (M = 3.2, SD = 0.8) and Group2 (M = 3.8, SD = 0.7), t(36) = 5.1, p < .001.

Using Cohen's d, the following observed effect sizes were large, indicating substantial improvement in scores: ideas (0.82), organization (0.93), voice (1.59), sentence fluency (1.08), and conventions (0.85). The effect size for word choice was medium (0.79). Figure 2 shows a graph of pre/post measurement means for each of the Six Traits and observed effect sizes.

Figure 2: Growth on Six Traits Writing Rubric



Discussion and Implications

Interpretation of Findings

The current study tested whether the *Writing with Purpose* (WWP) routine would improve adolescent writing quality. Medium to large statistically significant positive group differences were found for all Six Traits domains—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions—and for paragraph structure. The WWP routine integrates a model-practice-reflect cycle with purpose-driven writing for authentic audiences. Each step may have contributed to gains. Steps P and U (plan purpose, understand audience) likely supported ideas and voice (Block & Strachan, 2019). Steps R and M (review models, ponder model moves) may have influenced word choice and organization by prompting students to emulate expert writing (Jagaiah et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2016). Step O (organize ideas) encouraged use of outlines or graphic organizers (Bulgren et al., 2009), contributing to organization scores. Step E (evaluate impact) supports reflection across traits. These findings align with Behizadeh (2014), who noted adolescents value authentic audiences and choice.

At first glance, results for sentence-level skills appear contradictory: no significant group effect on the Sentence Writing Score Sheet, yet large effects for sentence fluency and conventions on Six Traits. This reflects differences in instrument purpose and measurement. Six Traits assesses unconstrained skills (e.g., rhythm, varied structures, mechanics) using holistic ratings, while the Sentence Writing Score Sheet measures constrained skills objectively (sentence completeness, variety, punctuation). Scorers using Six Traits may be influenced by overall writing quality, whereas the score sheet isolates sentence-level accuracy. Students approached mastery on constrained skills at pre-test, suggesting a ceiling effect (Kalkbrenner, 2021). For example, sentence completeness averaged 83.6% pre and 88.4% post; variety 49.4% to 51.4%; punctuation 58.4% to 63.2%. Growth occurred but was insufficient for statistical significance at the group level, though some individuals showed significant gains.

Theoretical and Instructional Implications

The WWP routine occupies an intersection between sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978) and cognitivist (Mayer, 1998) approaches to instruction. Some critics of adolescent writing instruction argue that teachers fail to engage students in authentic, motivating tasks (McArthur, 2019). Sociocultural approaches leverage students' experiences and interests, emphasizing writing's utility beyond the classroom (Block and Strachan, 2019). However, managing individualized projects for many students is challenging, especially when teachers lack confidence in teaching writing (Graham et al., 2014).

Conversely, some critics also advocate for fidelity to a "guaranteed and viable curriculum" (e.g., Marzano, 2003), reflecting a cognitivist stance. Curricula developed by companies or individuals often focuses on specific learning goals and targets, placed in a particular order and accompanied by implementation resources like pacing guides to help teachers plan their instruction. While this approach may provide administrators peace of mind that they can place any student in any classroom and (theoretically) have all students enjoy the same learning experiences, there are problems with this approach as well. They rarely account for students' unique motivations, leaving teachers to face the challenge of meeting the demands of multiple student motivations with curricula developed without their specific group of students in mind, as well as varying definitions of words like *guaranteed*, *viable*, and *fidelity*.

The WWP routine can be viewed as a purpose-anchored refinement of process writing, offering a structured yet flexible approach to writing instruction. The routine supports teachers to provide evidence-based writing instruction while leaving space for teacher and student agency to

shape writing tasks and topics. WWP aligns with the IES recommended model-practice-reflect instructional cycle and is broad enough to be used with varied text structures and genres. The co-created WWP guide supports students and teachers to work through a writing process together and provides guidance for teachers who may not have high efficacy for writing instruction. Further, its use of a co-created writing checklist based on models, and use of that checklist with an authentic audience to inform revision capitalize on the use of metacognitive strategies to improve student performance (van der Stel & Veenman, 2014). WWP is grounded in the premise that when educators intentionally change students' writing opportunities by grounding them in a meaningful purpose, students are likely to engage deeply and perform at higher levels.

Limitations

Several limitations related to internal validity and generalizability warrant consideration. The single-arm pre/post design without a comparison group allowed for initial exploration of the WWP routine, but precluded causal inference. Additionally, the limited sample size restricted generalizability and since the WWP routine was implemented only once, it is unclear what effects would be if used across a school year with multiple writing prompts. Relatedly, pre- and post-assessment prompts were teacher-generated to be aligned with course content, and conditions for pre-writing samples were not controlled. Although this approach supports ecological validity, it introduced variability in prompt complexity and relevance that may have influenced results. Finally, students responded to argumentative prompts, so it is unclear whether the WWP routine would produce similar effects across other genres (e.g., narrative, expository).

Conclusion and Future Directions

The WWP routine will be published and available to educators in the near future. Recent federally-funded work to develop an AI-enhanced online adaptive writing program called iSTAR will integrate the WWP routine to support generalizing sentence and paragraph writing strategies. We also look to further study WWP effects in different instructional environments.

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Voices of Kansas, digitally published by the Kansas Association of Teachers of English, welcomes manuscripts and artwork in the categories of Perspectives & Literary Criticism, Artistic Expression, Poetry, and Creative Fiction & Non-Fiction from educators, student teachers, and students in grades 3-6 & 7-12. Our mission is for this journal to be a place for young writers to have a voice through both written and visual expression. Editor's choice entries will be featured with lesson plans aligned to Common Core Standards for use by English Language Arts teachers in the state of Kansas. Learn more at https://www.kansasenglish.org/voices-of-kansas.html.

"WE'RE BORED"
A NARRATIVE REFLECTION

Avery Gathright
Wichita Northwest High School

Abstract
In this creative reflection, the author recounts a classroom experience that both challenged and enlightened her during her spring 2026 teaching internship.

Keywords: teacher intern, student boredom, critical feedback, teacher responsiveness

It's 8:17 in the morning. Rain crashes against the giant windows that span the length of our classroom's back wall. Class has barely started, and I try desperately to suppress my own stifled yawns behind my steaming coffee cup as I let you all close your choice books and get out your notes. Your participation lately has been … reluctant. We're all exhausted, but I am eager to get class started. Today's lesson should be engaging, if not fun, for all. I have a bit of hope that today's review of the trolley problem, with a plot-relevant twist, will spur some excitement. What is it about death that gets you students talking so much?

But alas, it quickly becomes apparent that constant chattering, also a frequent issue, will not be an issue to triumph over with you all today.

"What do we remember from Scene 2?" I ask. "Feel free to use your notes!"

An eternity seems to pass as I look into the sea of your blank faces, dozens of pairs of unenthused eyes waiting for me to just give up the answer. Rain drip, drip, drips against the window, filling the silence that you all refuse to.

"Okay, review your notes with your partners!"

You are all aiming for the blue ribbon in a staring contest we did not enter, as you continue to not reach for the notes right in front of you. This isn't just the Monday morning speaking. I give in, but not in the way you all want.

"What's going on with you all? Tell me honestly. What is not clicking?"

It takes a moment to muster your courage. There is one more moment of still silence before one face in the sea bravely speaks, practically shouts, out: "Miss, we're bored!" Some more voices finally follow. "I agree. This play is boring!" "Well, it's kind of tough to read."

Finally. Something to work with! Something much more tangible than awkward silence. I think the argument-heavy, bloodshed-filled drama of *Antigone* is anything but boring, but back to the drawing board I go.

"You're bored? I can work with that. What might make this less boring?"

And now we're back to blank stares and the deafening silence of raindrops. Your answers today were not the scene summary I wanted, but they were what I needed to hear to fix this.

Author Biography

Avery Gathright is a 2026 graduate of Wichita State University's English Education Program. Gathright will begin her teaching career at Wichita Northwest High School in August, where she will teach 10th & 11th grade English. She can be reached at averygathright@outlook.com.

THE IN-BETWEEN

Alice Huelskamp
Kingman Middle-High School

Abstract
The author reflects on her experience as a teacher intern during the last year of a Secondary English Education degree at Wichita State University, using a creative writing piece to discuss one particular class.

Keywords: teacher intern, student teaching, creative writing, reflection piece

You all walk in the door as the last-minute warning song plays over the intercom.

One of you on the far-left row throws a pencil at the other, and the one acting as target suddenly turns attacker, swiftly catching the pencil and launching back to smack the original person's face before they can block the projectile. Somehow, in a way I can never hope to understand, this is funny to you, because you both giggle about it as you settle into your seats. It's not even 10 a.m.

Another one of you walks up to your desk and casually sits in the front. It's at your normal seat, but it takes me aback for a moment because you're almost never here, and it's been a week since I last saw you. Still, you are here, today. You smile and joke with the girl at your side like you haven't missed a beat, then she laughs and jokes back, and it feels like we're all right where we belong.

Two of you rush to ask me if you can go to the coffee shop, already displaying an energy that absolutely does not need the added fuel of caffeine and sugar. But your eyes are bright and wide, only exaggerated by the glare of overhead LEDs on your glasses, and the room feels just a few degrees off-balanced without your reactions to the class story, so, reluctantly or not, neither I nor you two can tell, I say yes. You both are gone and back in a flash.

One more of you brings in your guitar case, slung over your back and cradled with gangly limbs. You're quiet, as always, but there's an extra gleam in your eyes at the knowledge that maybe, just maybe, if the class wraps up early, you'll be able to sneak the guitar out and pluck a few quiet but confident chords before lunch. I'll never tell you, but the gleam in my eye is hoping for the same thing.

A new one of you slips into the room silently, which I cannot comprehend, because as soon as you catch my eye, you shout my name, drag me over, and begin to tell me all the drama of your latest forensics meet. I see where the success in theater comes from. You can hardly get the words out of your mouth around a smile or a grimace, depending on the wild emotions from one second to the next. Hopefully you can keep up that same energy for the next 75 minutes.

All the rest of you chatter, giggle, rustle paper and drop water bottles and zip zippers like it's your goal to create a chorus of noise with as many harmonies as possible. It is, as always, slightly overwhelming. It does, as always, make me smile on my way back to the front of the room.

The warning music finishes, and you've all made it (mostly) into your seats. You are all smiling, in your own ways—some louder than others, some subtler than the rest. The room speaks your comfort for you.

You are all here. Nineteen of you. The nineteen I started August together with, the nineteen who will help me close out May.

It isn't the start or end of the day, and it isn't the start or end of the year, or even the start or end of this path we're all walking through this building. It is, though, important. It's bright, and it's fun, and it's a spark that proves why I'm here. Why you're here. Why we all have been and all will be here.

Why all of this matters.

Why I can't wait to see you all next year.

Author Biography

Alice Huelskamp is a 2026 graduate of the secondary English education program at Wichita State University (WSU). In August, she will begin her teaching career at Kingman Middle-High School in Kingman, KS, while pursuing a master's degree in English at WSU. She looks forward to teaching the strengths and diversity of literature to middle and high school students in rural Kansas, and she is extremely excited to build the biggest classroom library she possibly can. Alice can be contacted at aphuelskamp@gmail.com.

TIGER-TRAPPING IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM: A REVIEW OF *WHEN YOU TRAP A TIGER*

Hailey Aranda-Mayorga
Wichita State University

Abstract
When You Trap a Tiger by Tae Keller is a compelling middle grades novel that explores identity, culture, and loss through Lily's journey of family, grief, and self-discovery. Blending magical realism with emotional depth, the story encourages readers to find their voice while highlighting the importance of acceptance, cultural understanding, and connection.

Keywords: Tae Keller, identity, culture, loss, grief

Published in 2020 by the Random House Books for Young Readers, *When You Trap a Tiger* is a middle grades novel written by Tae Keller. The book was awarded the 2021 Newbery Medal and the Asian/Pacific American Award for Children's Literature. The story follows Lily and her journey as she learns more about her family, loss, and herself. Lily sees herself as an "invisible girl," often feeling unnoticed by those around her. However, while traveling with her family to move in with her *halmoni* (the Korean word for grandmother), Lily spots a tiger—that only she can see—in the street staring directly at her. After learning the truth about her *halmoni*'s health, Lily sets out to trap the tiger and make a deal to return the stories *halmoni* "stole" in exchange for healing her grandmother. Throughout the story, Lily's sister Sam and their mother play important roles as the three struggle to agree on how to care for *halmoni*, each choosing their own solution. Ultimately, the book highlights the tension between believing things can be changed and overall acceptance that what is happening cannot be changed.

What drew me to this book was how invested I became in the story, and I think students would feel the same way. It is hard to put the book down as the storytelling is very compelling and keeps readers curious about what will happen next. The book offers teachers opportunities to discuss themes of identity, culture, and emotional growth, while encouraging readers to find their voice and embrace who they are, taking pride in their own story and the story of where or who they come from. For students who may be struggling with grief, the book is relatable, emphasizing that healing will take time, but no one must go through it alone. By highlighting the importance of family, friends, and community, it motivates readers to find connection and support within the people around them. Additionally, the book is culturally insightful, introducing readers to aspects of Korean culture they may not be familiar with. Students can explore perspectives and lives different from their own while making connections to their own families and experiences.

When You Trap a Tiger would be best suited for upper elementary students, particularly in fourth through sixth grade reading classes or reading intervention groups for students reading above grade level. Because of the book's themes and vocabulary, it would work especially well with students who need a more challenging text. The book would be a strong choice for literature circles or small-group reading, where students could keep notes and participate in discussions throughout the novel. Students could use the text to practice making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections, while also analyzing plot, setting, and character development. The story also provides opportunities to examine the author's diction and discuss how word choice contributes to the mood and meaning of the story.

However, there may be some challenges to incorporating the book in a classroom. Though the book can be an effective way of discussing grief and loss in the classroom, some students may be sensitive to the topics of illness and death. Teachers need to approach these themes with much care, and be prepared to provide emotional support for students who may have personal experiences with loss. Additionally, for some students, this may be their first time thinking about the reality of losing someone close to them, which could be an emotional and difficult realization.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed the novel and believe it would be a valuable addition to an upper elementary classroom. Its engaging storyline and emotional depth make it easy for readers to become invested in Lily's journey, while the themes of identity, culture, grief, and acceptance create opportunities for meaningful discussion. Although teachers would need to approach some topics with care, the book offers students the chance to reflect on their own experiences, learn about perspectives different from their own, and ask important questions. More than anything, *When You Trap a Tiger* is a story that stays with readers and encourages them to think deeply about themselves, their families, and the world around them.

Generative AI disclosure statement: Generative AI was used to assist with grammatically reorganizing and refining ideas based on my original drafts. All final content reflects my own understanding and has been reviewed and edited by me.

Author Biography

Hailey Aranda-Mayorga is a student at Wichita State University, studying education and sociology while striving to become an elementary school teacher. Nearing her graduation, she is placed in a fifth-grade classroom for her student teaching semester. Her love for education comes from her desire to empower students and help them recognize that they are capable of great things. She hopes to teach students not only academic skills, but also the confidence and life skills they need to navigate the world around them. She can be reached at hharanda-mayorga@shockers.wichita.edu.

FAVORABLY PORTRAYING AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES THROUGH PENPALS: A REVIEW OF *OUTDOOR FARM, INDOOR FARM*

Amanda K. Stinemetz
Fort Hays State University

Abstract
Outdoor Farm, Indoor Farm depicts a wonderful parallel between traditional farming practices and modern technological growing techniques (aeroponics) portrayed through a penpal relationship between two children. The book informs readers about agricultural practices and seasonal growth while also sending positive messages about diversity, independence, and women in science.

Keywords: Lindsay H. Metcalf, agriculture, diversity, women in science, outdoor farm, indoor farm

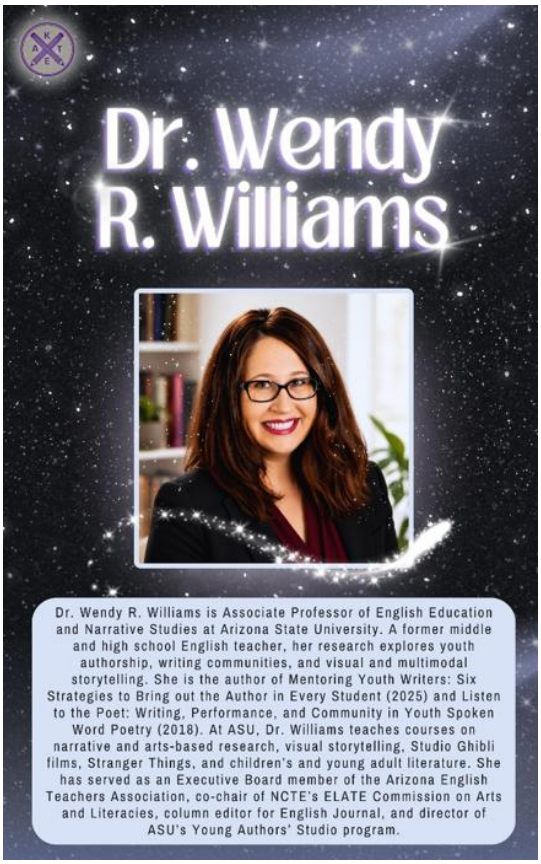
In *Outdoor Farm, Indoor Farm* (2024) by Lindsay H. Metcalf (illustrated by Xin Li), positive messages abound for young readers, especially through the lens of agriculture. In this text, readers learn about traditional farming practices as they compare to modern technological growing techniques (aeroponics). The varied practices, expectations associated with stages of growth, and developments as they align with the seasons are accompanied by masterful illustrations that are colorful, creative, and captivating. This information about farming, combined with the appealing artwork, is particularly valuable for children living in densely populated or metropolitan areas, as it is visually stimulating in a way that enhances children's understanding of growing practices. Further, the parallel between traditional farming and modern growing techniques is presented by means of penpal communication between children (a boy named Efram and a girl named Emma) whose mothers are the lead farmers and agricultural scientists.

Aside from the agricultural focal point, the text itself celebrates diversity through its creative illustrations. Efram and his mother are presented as African while Emma and her mother are portrayed as Hispanic. This portrayal promotes a positive message about diversity within higher levels of research and management within the agricultural work environment. Additionally, the positive message about independence, strength, and women in science is further communicated by strategic illustrations of both mothers actively farming, researching, repairing equipment, and managing others. Again, the reading presents informative details about the process of growing crops in agriculture; however, diversity is celebrated by its portrayal of people in positions of authority, and women are further elevated because they are represented as leaders and decision makers. This speaks well to children and offers them a valuable, yet subtle, message. Beyond the storyline and visually stimulating artwork, the reading also provides a written summary of the process for growing plants traditionally as well as via aeroponics; moreover, government-sponsored links (including one from NASA Climate Kids) are shared as references for people who wish to independently explore technological resources for growth practices.

This book would be ideal for a primary classroom, as it would positively complement a "seed germination" science project. Given the list of useful government link resources, teachers could easily enlist support and guidance from these websites to enhance students' learning. To build on the penpal feature of the text, teachers could guide students to writing letters to (or in exchange with) students in a different region of the nation, such as students from Kansas writing to Alaska, or perhaps students in Washington writing to peers in Florida. The final positive element about this book is that it was authored by a Kansas writer, which should inspire students by helping them see themselves in this creation. What I enjoy most about this book is that it informs children about agriculture and provides visually stimulating images to help children see what farming looks like, even though they may live in a city environment.

Author Biography

Amanda Stinemetz, Ph.D., is entering her 19th year of teaching. While finishing her MA, Amanda was central in creating a university-level English as a Second Language (ESL) Program. During this time (2008-2017), she taught and extensively travelled to build international partnerships and recruit students. During her brief time away from Kansas (2018-2021), Amanda served as the Director of Internationalization at Fairmont State University and was also the State Coordinator for DE English. Upon returning to Kansas (from West Virginia), she taught ELA at a rural junior/senior high school. She returned to FHSU in fall 2023 as Assistant Professor of English and is currently the Coordinator of Secondary ELA Teacher Education. She has maintained KATE membership for most of her teaching career; in 2024, she was appointed to the position of English Language Learner (ELL) liaison on the KATE Board. She can be reached at akstinemetz@fhsu.edu.



"IT'S OKAY TO BE SCARED": FINDING HOPE AMID THE HORROR IN *HELL FOLLOWED WITH US*

Alice Huelskamp
Kingman Middle-High School

Abstract
The author reviews Andrew Joseph White's novel *Hell Followed with Us* (2022), including a summary, potential for classroom relevance, and reflections on the importance of diverse queer stories for youth in turbulent and marginalizing times.

Keywords: Andrew Joseph White, young adult horror literature, facing adversity, queer stories, gender diversity, trans identities

"That's what you'll find here. Terrible things, survival, love, and a future worth fighting for." These words close off the preceding Letter from the Author of Andrew Joseph White's 2022 fantasy novel *Hell Followed with Us*. They are also a promise that White keeps steadfast throughout his novel, and never lets the audience forget about, even in the bleakest moments.

Hell Followed with Us is the story of 16-year-old Benji, a trans boy raised in the fundamentalist religious cult that unleashed their bioweapon, the Flood, which nearly ended Earth's population. In the midst of artificial Armageddon, Benji has to not only survive the violence of wars, but also the violence of existence as a queer kid in a culture that does not welcome him. Thankfully, he is able to find fellow queer and marginalized teens, and learn about their journeys through the same challenges. Horror surrounds Benji and his newfound community, but they fight tooth and nail to survive and love through it all in a story that refuses to let these kids' fire burn out.

At times, the pro-trans messages of *Hell Followed with Us* can read as loud as a neon sign flashing inches from the reader's face. This lack of subtlety might be a detriment to many other books, but it is practically necessary for this one. When marginalized voices are silenced— both in the novel and in the world in which it was published— there is no room for stifling those voices in the spaces where they *can* speak. The novel screams its queerness at the top of its lungs, taking the approach that if it is to speak, it must speak *loud*. Benji never lets the reader forget that his trans identity exists, or that transness cannot be separated from who he is. Perhaps, in this case, an "inside voice" is the exact opposite of what is needed.

In his own words, Andrew Joseph White "writes about trans kids with claws and fangs, and what happens when they bite back." As readers move through *Hell Followed with Us*, there is no question about whether his words hold true. Benji's story is one of unflinching authenticity, and the refusal to stay quiet in a world that wants nothing more than to see him dead. As full of fantasy and grandiose fiction Benji's story is, the horror of it is, unfortunately, all too real. Queer kids are living in increasingly fearful times, surrounded by rhetoric and policies that place a target on their backs. It's not difficult to see the fear shrouding Benji and his friends in kids just like them all across the country, where marginalized kids must live in constant fear for their lives. Rather than write a world

where that fear is nonexistent fantasy, White makes the fantasy entirely revolve around that real fear. This is a horror story.

But it is also a hope story. Partway through the novel, Benji picks up a mantra that follows him to the very end: "It's okay to be scared." Each time he says it, the words sound as if they are just as much for the reader as they are for the characters. Queer and marginalized kids do not live fear-free. Nothing is gained from platitudes of "don't worry" or "everything will turn out fine" when for many queer kids, things do not, in fact, turn out "fine." In 2025 alone, the American Civil Liberties Union tracked 616 anti-LGBT+ bills proposed across the United States (ACLU, 2025). Queer youth know that the world around them is hostile, and they cannot afford to forget that fact and drop their vigilance. Benji reminds kids that they can be scared when the world *is* scary. Yet, he also reminds them, they need to survive that world.

A novel such as *Hell Followed with Us* is a ripe opportunity to put the simultaneous hope-horror of marginalization into the spotlight in a classroom. There is often a fine line between acknowledging marginalization and reducing identities to nothing more than their oppression. White carefully keeps his novel from crossing this line, and teachers can follow his direction in conversations with their students. Excerpts from throughout the novel— even including forewords by the author— can provide students with the opportunity to study how marginalization affects the queer community. More importantly, though, students can tackle the ongoing fight for life and liberty unfolding in their own lifetime. This novel provides a view into another perspective for cisgender students and a realistic catharsis for transgender students. Then, it goes a step further, and challenges students to act courageously in response, challenges them to be brave while afraid.

Hell Followed with Us does not ask queer kids to pretend hate and horror do not exist. Instead, it tells queer kids that it is okay to be scared in what feels like Hell itself. It tells them that the fight for survival is scary, but that it's also worth fighting for. It tells them that there is hope, even among the horror. It tells kids who are beaten down by the world to spit out the blood, stand up despite the weight of terror, and speak their names with teeth bared, heart pounding, and love persisting. It tells kid that— even in the terror and violence and confusion— there is still a future worth fighting for.

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A LESSON IN POWER AND POLITICS: ALAN GRATZ'S *WAR GAMES*

Sasha Joy
Emporia State University

Abstract: Alan Gratz's 2025 novel *War Games* follows a 13-year-old Evie as she competes in gymnastics in the 1936 Berlin Olympics and becomes involved in a plan to rob the German central bank. Gratz explores power and politics as Evie learns the truth of the Nazi Regime, in a way that draws uncomfortable but undeniable comparisons to 2025 United States.

Keywords: Alan Gratz, 1936 Berlin Olympics, World War 2, Nazi Germany, power, race

Alan Gratz's 2025 young adult novel *War Games* follows 13-year-old Evie as she competes in gymnastics in the 1936 Berlin Olympics for Team USA. As Evie competes for fame and money to help her family in California displaced by the Dust Bowl, she is approached by a journalist with a plan to rob the *Reischbank*, the central bank where gold and jewels stolen from Jewish-German citizens were stored, with two other athletes. However, as the story progresses, Evie learns about the evil and dark secrets of the Nazi regime in Berlin and begins to question if Berlin is really the shiny, advanced city that it appears to be.

On the surface, this book appears to present an outlandish heist to rob a heavily secured vault with a mismatched team of friends to earn gold for the resistance against Nazis. However, I would argue that Gratz really presents the reader with a study in the power dynamics of a fascist state. As the book progresses and Evie learns more about the "real" Germany, she begins to realize that the people she meets in Berlin are either trying to win back power that has been taken from them or holding onto the power that has been bestowed upon them. She struggles to make sense of the conflicting power dynamics around her; someone tells her that the Nazis are neither good nor bad but are simply "takers" in a world in which power must be taken or lost. However, as Evie realizes the Nazis have imprisoned, robbed, or killed the so-called "undesirables," she understands that power is more than a simple binary concept, but instead involves money, history, race, and emotion, among other things.

Although Gratz's lesson in power should appeal to all readers, I believe the book would primarily appeal to middle school readers; it is straightforward, entertaining, and to be frank, at some points rather corny. Still, the story ends with a happy ending for all involved and allows students to study a setting which may strike some readers (in a way that is quite frightening) as quite similar to the modern political climate of the United States. That being said, this very element of the book could pose a challenge for an educator that decides to teach this book in an ELA classroom. The comparisons Gratz makes between 1936 Berlin and 2025 United States is undeniable; in fact, at one point, Evie wonders, "What I really don't understand is how a country elected a man to be their leader after he'd led an insurrection to overthrow the government" (Gratz, 2025, p. 77). This most certainly would lead to students asking questions that their teacher may have a hard time answering

in this political climate that leaves educators feeling as though they work in a panopticon. Still, although it may raise some difficult questions, I believe that *War Games* provides an ample opportunity for young adult readers to learn more about the 1936 Berlin Olympics and Nazi Germany, while realizing the fickle nature of power and politics.

Reference

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Author Biography

Sasha Joy is a senior Bachelor of Science Secondary Education English and Spanish Language & Culture double major at Emporia State University. She has written extensively about the relationship between masculinity, authority, and fascism in Federico García Lorca's plays, *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* and *Bodas de Sangre* and recently presented her work at the Midwest Modern Language Association Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference in Lexington, Kentucky. Sasha will graduate in December of 2026 and intends to pursue a PhD. She can be reached at sjoy@g.emporia.edu.

TIME TRAVEL, TEEN ANXIETY, AND DOOMSDAY PREPPING IN *THE FIRST STATE OF BEING*

Amanda K. Stinemetz
Fort Hays State University

Abstract
The author reviews the young adult fantasy novel *The First State of Being* (2024) by Erin Entrada Kelly, providing analysis and suggestions for teaching.

Keywords: Erin Entrada Kelly, *The First State of Being,* anxiety, doomsday prepping, time travel

In *The First State of Being* (2024), author Erin Entrada Kelly quickly engages readers by introducing them to main characters Michael, an anxious twelve-year-old struggling with change as he prepares for a new academic year at an unfamiliar school, and Gibby, his confident fifteen-year-old babysitter who is guided by curiosity and desire to make sense of the world. Michael and Gibby's familiar routine is quickly offset when they encounter Ridge, an unknown teenage boy prowling the apartment complex; he is obviously lost and is asking strange questions about the environment—and the date. Eventually, after gaining Michael and Gibby's trust, Ridge reveals that he is a time traveler from the year 2199. However, Ridge's intended "quick visit" is compromised when a series of complications unfold, threatening his return home as well as the entire timeline of existence. As Michael and Gibby attempt to solve the issues of time travel sans adults, their lives are further shaken by a sudden death. Despite the tangibility of despair and dismalness, the first favorable domino falls for the teenage trio, setting into motion a series of events that restore the timeline and return hope to Michael, Gibby, and Ridge. This John Newbery Medal-winning novel (2025) fantastically maneuvers among the monumental shaping power of the past, the building promise of the future, and the underrealized significance of living in the moment—in the first state of being—to build the next page for all of humankind.

This novel would appeal to all teen readers (middle and high school) because the main characters are teens. Also, teens can easily relate to Michael's ongoing struggle with anxiety, which is triggered by personal identity, school, financial issues, and Y2K. Further, given the historical relevance of Y2K, which is prevalent in this novel, this is suitable for an interdisciplinary project between English and history because it frames exploratory research about Y2K. Additionally, this interdisciplinary project can also explore teenage culture (fashion, music, and language) of the 1990s. The countless references to "common language" as it was used among teens in 1999 promises a humorous review of language as it was used then as well as how it is used now (e.g., *bruh*, *fyre*, *no cap*). There are additional themes that are more serious that would also serve students well, such as the issue of finances and living in a low-income home with a single parent, as well as dealing with death and making sense of grief and living. Finally, given the element of time travel, the novel touches on environment and wildlife and references how decisions made today can directly and aggressively impact the future. The novel seamlessly weaves together the importance of time, emphasizing that

decisions made today will shape the future of humankind. Ultimately, this novel is suitable for all teen readers; it is wholesome, uplifting, and provides a healthy escape into time to realize the power of now.

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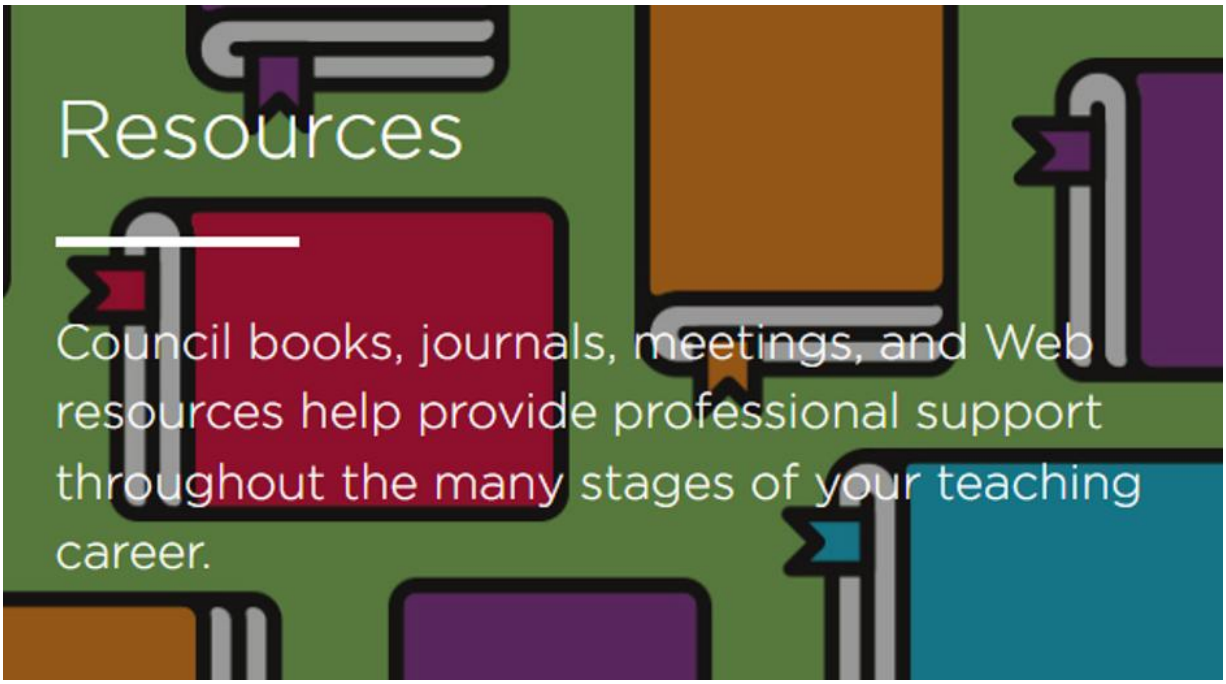
Author Biography

Amanda Stinemetz, Ph.D., is entering her 19th year of teaching. While finishing her MA, Amanda was central in creating a university-level English as a Second Language (ESL) Program. During this time (2008-2017), she taught and extensively traveled to build international partnerships and recruit students. While briefly away from Kansas (2018-2021), Amanda served as Director of Internationalization at Fairmont State University and was also the State Coordinator for DE English. Upon returning to Kansas (from West Virginia), she taught ELA at a rural high school. She returned to Fort Hays State University in fall 2023 as Assistant Professor of English and is currently the Coordinator of Secondary ELA Teacher Education. She has maintained KATE membership for most of her teaching career; in 2024, she was appointed to the position of English Language Learner (ELL) liaison on the KATE Board. She has also served as KATE Secretary and KATE Conference Co-Chair since 2025. Amanda can be reached at akstinemetz@fhsu.edu.



Visit the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) website to access resources like lesson plans, journals, quick-reference guides, the Intellectual Freedom Center, position statements, reports, and white papers.

THE IMPOSSIBLE ESCAPE: A LITTLE-KNOWN STORY THAT EXPOSED THE TRUTH ABOUT AUSCHWITZ

Danny Wade
Washburn University

Abstract
The author reviews the young adult historical nonfiction work, *The Impossible Escape: A True Story of Survival and Heroism in Nazi Europe* (2023) by Steve Sheinkin.

Keywords: Auschwitz, Gerti Sidonova, historical nonfiction, Holocaust, Hungary, Nazi Europe, Poland, Rudi Vrba, Vrba-Wexler Report

Steve Sheinkin has done it again, delivering a suspenseful, mesmerizing, edge-of-your seat story in his latest historical nonfiction work, *Impossible Escape* (2023). In 1942, the lives of Jewish teenagers Rudi Vrba and Gerti Sidonova are tragically disrupted as Nazi control strengthens across Slovakia and the persecution of Jews escalates. Determined to escape, Rudi attempts to flee but is captured and sent to a labor camp in Novaky. From there, he is sent by train to Auschwitz in Poland where he is imprisoned under inhumane conditions. Meanwhile, Gerti's family flees to Hungary, where they live under false identities, constantly hiding the fact that they are Jewish.

From Rudi's perspective, we witness the atrocities of Auschwitz firsthand. In contrast, through Gerti's story we experience how life in hiding, though not as harrowing as Rudi's experience in Auschwitz, is still one of fear, uncertainty, and loss. Though Gerti is not confined like Rudi, her discovery could result in imprisonment or death at any moment.

Rudi's miraculous escape from Auschwitz becomes a suspenseful race against time. Readers experience his intense physical and psychological suffering, never knowing his fate until the very end. Rudi is able to persevere because he comes to understand that his escape is no longer about his own personal survival—it is about exposing the truth to the world, to deliver his eyewitness detailed account of unimaginable genocide happening at the Auschwitz death camp.

By pairing Rudi and Gerti's stories, Sheinkin shows that Jewish survival of the Holocaust took many forms. Their experiences reveal how luck, timing, urgency, consequence, perseverance, and extraordinary courage enabled some individuals to survive and tell their stories of truth to the world. Most importantly, Rudi's detailed account of Auschwitz became what is known as the Vrba-Wexler report. The Vrba-Wexler report was published in June of 1944 and is credited for saving many Jewish lives.

The work will appeal to middle school and high school readers because Sheinkin's use of narrative storytelling allows adolescent readers to experience history vicariously through Rudi and Gerti's stories. While *Impossible Escape* conveys important historical facts about the Holocaust, it does

so alongside the human story behind those facts. For young readers to learn effectively from history, they must feel the emotional impact of events that is difficult to achieve through a purely informational way.

Though the work is grounded in extensive research, some readers may challenge its authenticity because Sheinken employs narrative techniques that may feel like embellishment. However, at the end of the work, Sheinken provides comprehensive sources notes and a robust bibliography that includes firsthand accounts as well as reliable secondary sources. Readers who wish to verify the accuracy of events or explore the historical content further may consult those materials.

On October 7, 2026, Washburn University will host the Heartland Literature Festival where Steve Sheinken will be the featured author. Sheinken and volunteers will give presentations and lead discussions of the *Impossible Escape.* Registration for students and teachers will open August 2026 at the thewritingconference.com.

Reference

Sheinkin, S. (2023). *Impossible Escape: A True Story of Survival and Heroism in Nazi Europe*. Roaring Book Press.

Author Biography

Dr. Danny Wade is the Associate Provost of Faculty Development and Professor of English Education at Washburn University, where he has taught for 18 years. He earned his Ph.D. in English Education from the University of Oklahoma and brings a combined 28 years of experience in education. Before joining Washburn, Dr. Wade taught middle and high school English for ten years in Colorado and Oklahoma. At Washburn, he teaches courses such as Teaching Young Adult Literature, Teaching Composition, and Secondary English Methods, and he supervises student teachers. His research interests include adolescent literacy, the teaching of poetry, and young adult literature, reflecting his deep commitment to preparing future educators to connect meaningfully with young readers and writers. He can be reached at danny.wade@washburn.edu.

REPRESENTATION AND INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES IN *LAST NIGHT AT THE TELEGRAPH CLUB*

Katherine Mason Cramer
Wichita State University

Abstract
The author reviews multi-award-winning YA novel *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021) by Malinda Lo, providing a summary, essential questions, and teaching ideas.

Keywords: historical YA fiction, Malinda Lo, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, LGBTQ+ identities, Chinese-American identities, Red Scare, Lavendar Scare, STEM

Winner of the 2021 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021) is set in 1950s Chinatown with McCarthyism running rampant. The novel follows 17-year-old Chinese American Lily Hu, who dreams of becoming an astronaut or a computer at the Jet Propulsion Lab. While her academic and professional dreams are encouraged by her aunt Judy and her newfound Caucasian friend Kathleen (Kath) Miller, they are mocked by Lily's longtime friend Shirley Lum, who dreams of getting married and having kids after winning the Miss Chinatown contest. The central conflict of the novel emerges as Lily begins to recognize within herself a desire to see a male impersonator perform at a lesbian bar called the Telegraph Club and read lesbian pulp fiction (even though obscenity laws at the time required tragic endings for LGBTQ+ characters). Although she instinctively knows it's forbidden, she wonders if her friend Kath is "like the girls in the book too? Because I think I am" (p. 100). As she and Kath share their interest in STEM fields, they also develop a romantic relationship without their families' knowledge—until the Telegraph Club is raided, and Lily must decide whether to embrace her authentic self or remain "a good Chinese girl" (p. 328), as her parents demand.

In terms of author craft, Lo has organized the novel into six parts, each of which features a title from a 1950s "crooner" song (e.g., "I Only Have Eyes for You") and is dated with the month/year of Lily's senior year at Galileo High School from August 1954 through January 1955. Each part ends with a flashback from the perspective of Lily's mom Grace, her aunt Judy, or her father Joseph, as well as a historical timeline from which the interlude occurs (2-20 years earlier). Additionally, Lo provides an in-depth author's note to help readers contextualize her use of multiple Chinese dialects in the novel, 1950s U.S. and San Francisco history, Chinatown and Chinese Americans, and LGBTQ+ history.

This novel would appeal to readers in grade 10 and up, as well as readers with interests in sapphic representation/romance, Chinese American history, American history, LGBTQ+ history,

and/or women in STEM fields. Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* prompts readers to consider the following essential questions:

1. In what ways do you feel seen/represented in your communities and in mainstream media? In what ways do you feel unseen/unrepresented in these spaces?
2. Moving beyond yourself, what identities or groups are missing in your communities and/or in the mainstream media you consume? What changes can you make to your media consumption or daily routines that would expand your understanding of diverse identities and experiences?
3. How do you determine when to "fit in" to your various communities (e.g., family, friends, neighborhood, teams, clubs, congregations) and when to stand out/away from those groups?
4. What expectations/pressures do you feel to "fit in"? How do you stand up to those expectations/pressures when fitting in is not the right choice for you?

In English language arts classrooms, teachers could use these questions to prompt discussion for a whole-class reading of the novel, or to encourage individual students to select this book for book clubs, literature circles, and/or their independent reading.

In addition to these essential questions, Lo's novel will inspire further inquiry with learning activities such as these:

1. **"I Can Dream, Can't I?"**: In Part I of the novel, we learn that Lily dreams of becoming an astronaut or a mathematician, but she is mocked by her long-time friend Shirley. What are your dreams (professional, academic, personal)? Where do you find support for your dreams? Where do you find a lack of support? What steps will you take to achieve your dreams regardless of the support you have? Reflect, write, discuss.
2. **Implicit Bias Reflection:** At the Telegraph Club and outside of Chinatown, Lily is often the only Asian American present, and people wrongly assume that she does not speak English and call her patronizing names like "China Doll." Pay attention to your initial thoughts when you encounter someone who is different from you, and capture them in your writer's notebook. If you are 18 or older, consider taking an implicit bias test via Harvard's Project Implicit at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html. Bring your observations and reflections to class for continued inquiry.
3. **Musical Inquiry:** Research your choice of the six songs that serve as titles for each part of the novel. Do a close read of the lyrics; listen to different artists perform the song; analyze how effectively it connects to that specific part of the novel and the novel as a whole.
4. **Historical Inquiry:** After reading the novel and the author's note, choose any person, event, place, or issue depicted in the novel to research and then present your findings during a roundtable "conference" session. Potential topics include but are not limited to the Red Scare, Lavender Scare, Senator Joseph McCarthy, Dr. Hsue-shen Tsien, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Chinese language and dialects, lesbian pulp novels, M.E. Kerr, Chinatown, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and/or his wife Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, Chinese Exclusion Act, McCarran-Walter Act, Chinese Confession Program, cross-gender impersonation, Daughters of Bilitis, Forbidden City, Dr. Margaret Chung.

As Lo reminded listeners in her 2021 National Book Award winning acceptance speech, representation matters. She implored listeners to resist book censorship and efforts to remove books by and about LGBTQ+ people and people of Color, urging readers and teachers to keep these books on the shelves: "Don't let them erase us" (National Book Awards, 2021, 1:20:30). *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is yet another captivating and important YA book by Malinda Lo, and I highly recommend it!

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Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is in her 17th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools. She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.

A PAINTER, A PAINTING, AND PERCEPTION IN *THE MONA LISA VANISHES*

Kevin Kienholz
Emporia State University

Abstract: The author reviews Nicholas Day's *The Mona Lisa Vanishes: A Legendary Painter, A Shocking Heist, and the Birth of a Global Celebrity* (2023), including background information and a discussion of the book's exploration of the nature of contemporary celebrity culture.

Keywords: *The Mona Lisa Vanishes*, art history, celebrity culture, mass media

At first glance, Nicholas Day's 2023 exploration of the real-life 1911 theft of the *Mona Lisa* might not strike readers as a particularly contemporary story. One might reasonably assume this would be a tale of intrigue confined to the two years between the famous painting's theft and its (spoiler alert!) eventual recovery, but Day examines the theft of the world's most famous painting from a wide range of time periods, including our own contemporary world. It quickly becomes clear to readers that this story speaks not only to the time in which the painting was stolen but also to our present-day concerns. Thus, the book links two seemingly disparate worlds, separated by over 100 years, and examines how culture can be shaped by mass media and celebrity spectacle.

The tension in Day's book comes not from the fact that the Mona Lisa was stolen or even that it was recovered—many readers will know that both of those things happened before they pick up the book. Rather, the book gathers momentum from Day's exploration of the unlikely backstory of how the *Mona Lisa* came to be in the first place (it turns out that Leonardo da Vinci had *a lot* of trouble following through on his projects) and why the painting became so famous once it was finished. In short, Day does not shy away from the reader who might well be asking, "What's the big deal about this painting?" I've wondered that myself. It turns out that being stolen was a real boon for the *Mona Lisa*.

The narrative structure of this book takes readers back and forth in time, from 15th century Florence and Milan to 20th century Paris, as Day makes use of frequent shifts in setting which will challenge even the attentive reader. Likewise, keeping track of the numerous historical figures—both those who are famous and those practically unknown—places significant demands on anyone who tackles this book. But the author rewards his readers' persistence and attention with not only a fascinating who-done-it mystery, but a meditation on the way in which we perceive the world around us as well as an occasion to consider the very nature of celebrity. Brett Helquist's illustrations appear throughout the book, providing points of visual interest as well as anchors that help readers keep track of this complicated tale of intrigue.

Readers who enjoy history will appreciate this book—especially those interested in Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance world in which he lived. Fans of mystery will also enjoy this tale of an audacious crime and its slowly developing and sometimes bumbling investigation. With that said, Day provides a great deal to consider about our own world, especially in a culture in which plenty of

individuals seem to be famous simply for being, well, famous. He also explores what it means to live in a world viewed through a lens of mass media, the way in which conspiracy theories spread, the controversy concerning the return of stolen artwork to its country of origin, and the challenge of understanding what is right in front of our eyes. As Day notes, "Sometimes it is hardest to see what's most obvious."

More than 500 years after its creation, the *Mona Lisa* remains squarely in world's line of sight, and it continues to demand a second glance from everyone who contemplates that enigmatic smile. (A recent break-in at the Louvre should spur additional interest in this text.) While the center of this book remains the theft of a work of art destined to become the most famous painting in history, Day also manages to cleverly explore the idea of what makes something worth looking at in the first place. In today's attention economy, what could be more relevant than that?

Reference

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Author Biography

Kevin Kienholz is a professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Emporia State University, where he works primarily with preservice middle and high school English teachers. He joined the faculty at ESU in 2000 after having taught English for seven years in his home state of Oklahoma. He can be reached at kkienhol@emporia.edu.

CULTURAL IDENTITY, FAMILY HISTORY, AND GRITO IN *MEXIKID: A GRAPHIC MEMOIR*

Katherine Mason Cramer
Wichita State University

Abstract
The author reviews multi-award-winning YA graphic memoir *Mexikid: A Graphic Memoir* (2023) by Pedro Martín, providing a summary, essential questions, and teaching ideas.

Keywords: YA graphic memoir, Pedro Martín, *Mexikid: A Graphic Memoir*, Mexican-American identities, Mexican culture, Mexican history, multilingual storytelling, multimodal text

Pedro Martín is the seventh of nine kids in his Mexican-American family, and in 1977, his parents decided the family would take a road trip to Jalisco, Mexico, to bring Pedro's abuelito to the United States. Winner of the 2024 Pura Belpré Award (Author & Illustrator), Eisner Award, and Newbery Honor, *Mexikid: A Graphic Memoir* is the story of that adventure.

With the parents and the younger kids in the Winnebago Chieftan (delightfully illustrated and annotated on pp. 38-39) and the older kids driving the family pick-up truck (customized with a homemade wooden bench seat with ropes for seatbelts, p. 40), the Martín family makes the 2,000-mile journey. Along the way, Pedro and his siblings entertain themselves with unregulated Mexican toys and homemade audio recordings of Fleetwood Mac, *Happy Days*, and "Shipoopi" from *The Music Man*. Pedro also learns about his abuelito's heroism during the Mexican Revolution and his own apa's childhood, including the early deaths of his mom and four of his brothers. He finds out that Abuelito won't leave Mexico until Abuelita's remains are safely reburied in a new location (away from the underground river that has shifted course and is threatening the town cemetery). And Pedro finds his grito!

Mexikid will appeal to a variety of readers from early adolescence through adulthood: readers interested in exploring Mexican geography, culture, and history and bilingual storytelling; readers who want a (mostly) lighthearted tale that explores serious themes with tenderness and poignancy, while also eliciting uproarious laughter; readers who enjoy eye-catching art and design elements in graphic texts; and readers who want to appreciate the power and joy of recollecting indelible moments and iconic pop culture from childhood.

This would be an excellent text for educators to include in their English language arts, world languages/cultures, and/or social studies curriculums, and it might inspire inquiry related to the following essential questions (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005):

1. How does/will it feel to say goodbye to home? When have you had to say goodbye to home (or when will you)?
2. When did/will you cross the border from childhood to adulthood? What does it mean to grow up and be responsible for your loved ones?
3. How does one honor all their intersecting identities, cultures, and/or traditions?

4. Is it possible to find humor in times of grief, pain, or uncertainty? If so, *should* we?

Additionally, educators may be interested in including the following learning activities/assessments in their curriculum planning around *Mexikid*:

1. **Analyze design elements in graphic texts:** Select a 2 to 4-page passage from the book, or a vignette from https://www.mexikid.com/. Analyze Martín's use of design elements (linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, auditory) in the text. What messages does each mode convey? What inferences can you draw, and what evidence supports the meaning you construct?
2. **Geography/Social Studies connections:** Track the Martín family trip from California to Jalisco, Mexico, and back to Watsonville, California (they take two different routes). What sights would they see along the way? How does their experience crossing the border compare to/contrast with how U.S. citizens cross the border today?
3. **Compose from Personal Experience:** Martín writes in detail about his family and his experiences on this road trip, often depicting popular culture that defined his childhood.
    a. Using Martín's text as a mentor text (particularly pp. 1-10), depict yourself and/or the important people in your life (family, friends, loved ones) using both print and nonprint text. Sketch ideas in your writer's notebook.
    b. What elements of popular culture were/are indelible in your childhood? What stories could you tell about them? Brainstorm ideas in your writer's notebook.
4. **Heroes and Fools:** Martín has stated that "the best stories rely heavily on abandoning your ego in service of the story" (Schwartz, 2024). The stories in which we are foolish, rather than heroes, might be the more interesting tales. Brainstorm stories from your childhood in which you felt foolish or humiliated. Choose one story to write about in your writer's notebook. Reflect: how does your telling of this story now shift how you perceive your role in it and/or what you learned from it?

Pedro Martín describes his memoir *Mexikid* as "a story about cultural identity, family history, and maturity (but also thick boogers, sudden diarrhea, and live deer surgery)" (Schwartz, 2024). It is enlightening, tender, and hilarious—and I highly recommend it!

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Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is in her 17th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools. She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her

leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.

https://www.kansasenglish.org/apply-for-awards-scholarships-board-membership.html

APPROPRIATION OR CELEBRATION OF THE JAPANESE FOLKTALE "THE CRANE WIFE"? START THE CONVERSATION

Miriam Barton
Hesston College

Abstract
The underlying concept of this learning module, for secondary or college level English language arts (ELA) courses, is to begin a conversation about what it means to celebrate a culture vs. to appropriate a culture. This module features an original folktale from Japan "The Crane Wife" and two Western adaptations.

Keywords: "The Crane Wife," Japanese folktale, world literature, cultural appropriation, cultural awareness

As English teachers, we must remain cognizant of freedom of expression as a mindset, including the need to respectfully discuss the question of celebration vs. appropriation in relation to Western-centric adaptations of non-Western culture, art, and literature. Originally, I created this learning module for a college world literature course, though it would also be appropriate for secondary students.

The reading assignment is to examine a beloved Japanese folktale, as well as two adaptations of the folktale by Western artists:

- *Tsuru Nyōbō* – "The Crane Wife," a Japanese folktale. There are many versions available (free online and in the children's section of public libraries). It is perhaps the most well-known folktale from Japan.
- Ness, P. (2014). *The Crane Wife*. Canongate Books/Penguin.
- The Decemberists. (2014). "The Crane Wife, Parts 1, 2, and 3" [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPOMHM6waxk&t=164s.

I facilitate the conversation through an online discussion forum. Regardless of the assessments assigned to analyze and synthesize the material, students should base their responses on their personal insight and life experiences. Students need to engage with all three versions in the analytical work assigned to answer the following question: *Does a cross-cultural adaptation equal appropriation* ***or*** *celebration of the culture from which the original piece came?* There is no right or wrong answer here; we are simply looking for an open-minded and insightful conversation.

In the students' initial post, they need to include cited textual evidence from all three works in connection with an interrogation of their notions of cultural appropriation vs. appreciation. Then students are required to respond to at least two classmates in which they either elaborate on the

points made based on their personal experiences/perspective or they respectfully complicate the points being made by their classmates, based on their perspective from life experiences. The culture of the classroom learning community is that we value alternative perspectives as valid and important; that expectation is extended into this conversation. What students learn from this conversation grants them insight into their own cultural biases, helping to shift their previous notions and descriptions based on diverse cultural awareness.

Regardless of how the conversation goes, teachers are encouraged to let the students openly explore their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgement or disagreement from the instructor. We need to teach our students to respectfully disagree with and engage with each other. That begins with us encouraging diversity of thought in academic circles.

Author Biography

Miriam Barton is a professor of English at Hesston College, dual enrollment English outreach instructor for Hutchinson Community College, and a preservice teacher educator for the Kansas Independent College Association (KICA). She is also a PhD candidate at Kansas State University in Curriculum & Instruction with an emphasis in English language arts. She teaches a variety of composition, literature, creative writing, and secondary ELA methods courses.

CONSIDERING THE NATURE OF PATRIOTISM WITH A SORTING ACTIVITY

Sasha Joy
Emporia State University

Abstract
This article describes an activity in which students sort 10 index cards with actions that could be considered patriotic in order from least to most patriotic. With minimal preparation required, this is a simple activity that generates critical thinking and conversation among students about the nature of patriotism in context.

Keywords: patriotism, Constitution Day, sorting, small-group activity

Every year at Emporia State University on September 17, what is celebrated as Constitution Day, local high school students are invited to a day-long series of activities and workshops to learn more about and engage with the Constitution and Bill of Rights. In my workshop, I wanted students to engage with the idea of patriotism and what it means to be a patriot. With this in mind, I created the following activity: students received a set of ten 3 x 5 index cards with various actions written on them that could be interpreted as patriotic and were told to sort them from least to most patriotic. I split them into groups and allotted them five minutes to come to a consensus with their group about the ordering of their cards. The index cards I created contained the following activities:

1. Serving in the military
2. Reading American literature
3. Serving on a jury
4. Supporting national sports teams
5. Peacefully protesting government policy
6. Buying America-made products
7. Wearing clothes with the American flag
8. Voting in an election
9. Volunteering at a local organization
10. Running for political office

Before students began the activity, I read all the cards aloud and gave an example for each to avoid confusion and to give them a concrete example to draw from. Depending on the class or age of the students, these prompts could change. For instance, in a senior-level class where students have taken US History, perhaps adding specific examples, such as burning draft cards in the Vietnam War, could engage students in deeper conversations. It is also worth noting that, prior to this activity, students created their own definition of patriotism then compared it to an academic definition. This gave students context and an agreed upon definition to reference as they completed the activity.

When preparing to facilitate this activity, I was nervous as to what conversations this may inspire between students, and how conversations about patriotism and American identity can become unproductive. However, at no point did I identify a tense conversation or hurtful rhetoric shared between students. They negotiated among themselves about the order of their cards and had deep conversations about the nature of patriotism. Interestingly, every single group of students rated serving in the military as the most patriotic out of the options they were given. The order of the rest of the cards varied, but students seemed to prioritize the options which required action and choice over those that did not.

Overall, I believe this activity could be beneficial for classrooms of any age. The nature of the activity is flexible in that it allows the teacher to choose which options students will consider, but also requires critical thinking as students debate and prioritize some options over others. Although I allowed students to put some options as a tie, to further encourage conversation and critical thinking, one could remove this option. In general, I would consider this a relatively simple activity with minimal preparation required from the teacher that has the potential to generate interesting conversation among students and allow them to critically consider the concept of patriotism.

Author Biography

Sasha Joy is a senior BSE English and BA Spanish student at Emporia State University. She is student teaching in spring 2026 and plans to attend graduate school after graduation.

THE MANY USES OF THE MINI WHITEBOARD

Beth Gulley
Johnson County Community College

Abstract
In this teaching tip, the author highlights several different uses for the mini whiteboard in the English writing classroom, particularly to move students away from screens.

Keywords: active learning, writing activities, group work, similes, misplaced modifiers, description

Teachers have long complained about students who are distracted by their phones and tablets. I am one of those teachers, and recently, I have been experimenting with ways to get students off their phones and engaged with small, concrete writing activities. In this teaching tip, I share three brief activities that students can do with whiteboards. At my school, we are lucky to have mini whiteboards for each student, and our classrooms are surrounded by large whiteboards. Most of these activities could be done using either style.

1. **Describe the most specific _____.** In this exercise, students work in small groups to write the most specific description for a general noun the teacher assigns. The teacher sets a timer for two minutes. At the end of that time, the teacher asks the groups to share what they wrote on their whiteboards. For example, if the teacher asked students to describe the most specific automobile, they might write "a 2014 silver GMC Terrain that has a small rust spot on the driver's side passenger door. Inside it has grey cloth seats, a Sponge Bob air freshener on the rearview mirror, and an old Casey's cup in the driver's side cupholder."

   The team with the most specific description at the end of each round gets a point. This gives the teacher a chance to point out which descriptions work well and offer reasons why they work. Other general nouns that might work for this game include *person, meal, room, animal,* and *job*. Later when students revise their writing, teachers can remind them of the way they made nouns more specific through description when they did this activity.

2. **Illustrate Misplaced Modifiers.** After students have corrected a series of misplaced modifiers, the teacher asks them to draw a cartoon of the incorrect version of the sentence alongside a corrected version. This can be done by individuals or as a group activity.

   Here are two examples of sentences that contain misplaced modifiers: "Leaking in several places, the scouts abandoned their tents." "The bank will make loans to responsible people of any size." After drawing leaking scouts and people of any size, students start to notice misplaced modifiers in their own writing.

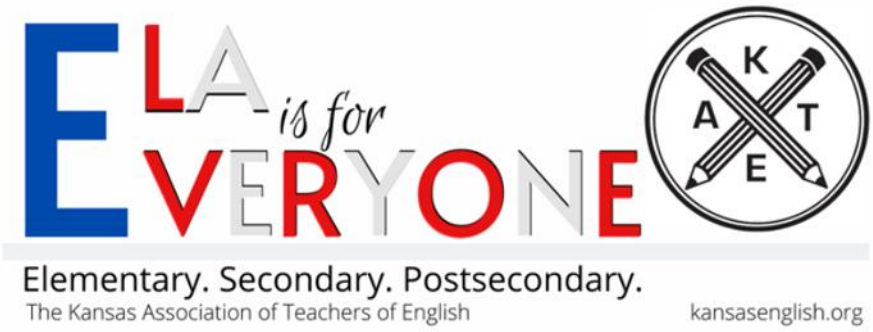
3. **Simile Starters.** The teacher places 8-10 whiteboards around the room. On each, the teacher should write part of a simile (e.g., *sweet as, loud like, rude as, grouchy as, silly like,* and *cold as* are simile starters). Then the teacher should put students in small groups. Pairs work best for this activity, but groups of three will also work. The teacher sets a timer, and then students need to generate the second part of the simile. For example, after "tall as" students might write "an old giraffe." After "happy like," students might write "a dog with peanut butter on his nose."

   Every two minutes, students rotate to the next white board. At the end of the activity, the students read all the similes on their board. The teacher might supply the person or thing that is "tall as" or "happy like" at this time as well. For example, "Our embedded tutor Ehren is happy like: a goldfish, a dog with peanut butter on his nose, Selly when her door dasher delivers her food, or you when you just clocked out at work."

I hope you find even more use for the mini whiteboard. If you do, please tell me about it in your own teaching tip next year.

Author Biography

Beth Gulley is a professor of English as Johnson County Community College. She has a Ph.D. in curriculum theory from the University of Kansas. Her research interests include active learning techniques, global engagement, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. In addition to her interest in curriculum, she has published ten collections of poetry and volunteers for The Writers Place, the Riverfront Reading Committee, and the Kansas Author's Club.



BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL FIELD EXPERIENCE: COLLABORATING WITH PROGRAM GRADUATES TO DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT AN APPLIED LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN A YAL METHODS COURSE

Katherine Mason Cramer
Wichita State University

Abstract
The author describes the collaboration between a university English Education program and four of its program graduates to design and implement an applied learning experience in which teacher candidates in a young adult literature (YAL) methods course engage in reading conferences with middle or high school students.

Keywords: reading conferences, book love, young adult literature, teacher education, collaboration

Let's face it: sometimes field experiences in teacher education programs provide opportunities for teacher candidates to observe and emulate best practice, and sometimes they don't. In fall 2022, I began collaborating with graduates of my middle/secondary English Education programs at Wichita State University (WSU) to create and implement an applied learning experience in my 3-credit-hour young adult literature (YAL) course. The goal: that my teacher candidates would engage in reading conferences with middle or high school students about their self-selected reading.

One of the required texts in my YAL course is Penny Kittle's popular *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers* (2013). In it, she emphasizes the importance of student choice in book selection and argues that too many kids don't read texts we assign in class; instead, they "fake read." She describes how she uses reading conferences "to move students from a fixed-performance frame to a dynamic one through the intentional use of language that imagines they can improve regardless of their prior success" (p. 77). Scholars agree that ample and consistent class time should be available for students' independent reading of self-selected texts (Beers, 2023; Buehler, 2016), and teachers' engagement in conferences with students about their chosen books builds students' reading lives (Bomer, 2011; Kittle, 2013; Paese, 2023). In short, we need to devote more time to choice reading in ELA and less time to required whole-class books.

I wanted to find classrooms where this was happening, so my teacher candidates could experience leading reading conferences that emphasize *book love* and provide opportunities for informal authentic assessment (e.g., listening to students, understanding their needs and interests). Luckily, I've been teaching at WSU long enough that I now have many program graduates who teach locally and who are eager to mentor future English teachers and collaborate with me. Over the past four years, I've had the honor of collaborating with English teachers at Pleasant Valley Middle School (Jessica Arbuckle, Jaden Brown, and Elizabeth Vest) and Wichita North High School (Lara Engle) to provide opportunities for my teacher candidates to engage in reading conferences with

students in classrooms that feature diverse classroom libraries and that emphasize book choice and book love!

In my middle/secondary English education programs, teacher candidates have school-based practicums and internships across four semesters, and these field experiences are scheduled outside of their on-campus courses. For this applied learning experience, I opted to have it occur during our regularly scheduled class meetings (Wednesdays, 12:30-3:20), so the candidates didn't have to find time in their schedule (and coordinate with another mentor teacher) for the experience. I attend to the logistics, so they don't have to. Three times during the semester (after midterm), we use our class time to drive to the school, engage in reading conferences for 20-30 minutes, debrief for 45-50 minutes in an open classroom (or outdoors if the weather permits), and then drive back to campus. I participate in the reading conferences too—if there are enough middle/high school students to go around!

My teacher candidates prepare for their first school visit by composing a pre-service planning paper in which they demonstrate their knowledge of reading conferences based on their reading of Kittle's *Book Love* (chapter 6 focuses specifically on conferences), as well as their knowledge of high-quality, diverse YA books that they can recommend to their students. During the school visit, teacher candidates are assigned to 2-3 students with whom they confer individually, following Kittle's conference framework: monitor a reading life, teach a reading strategy, and increase complexity and challenge (2013, pp. 80-88). They take notes on their conferences (as Kittle recommends), so they can debrief with their peers and me informally immediately afterward and then type up their conferences notes for submission in a Google Form accessible to me and the mentor teacher(s). The form requires the teacher candidates (and me) to submit the following information for each middle/high school student:

- Your name (last, first); student name (first name only); conference date
- Book the student is reading and page #
- What did the student share about their reading experience?
- What books did (or will) you recommend? What books did the student recommend to you?
- What reading strategy(ies) did you discuss or model?
- What else do you want to share about the conference?

In addition, after each school visit, teacher candidates compose a reflection to post on our class discussion board, responding to the following prompts:

1. Describe your experience during this week's reading conferences, noting challenges and successes.
2. What reading strategies did you discuss or model? How did it go?
3. What are your goals for improving your conferencing skills for next time?
4. *For sessions 2 and 3*: What goals were you focusing on, and did you achieve them?

Over the course of three visits with (ideally) the same set of students, my teacher candidates observe their students' growth (e.g., decreased resistance to reading/talking about reading; increased reading stamina; increased excitement about reading) and experience their own increased confidence in leading reading conferences in their classrooms. In fact, over the past four years, several teacher candidates have moved into their final year-long teaching internship with plans to collaborate with their mentor teachers to emphasize in-class choice reading and reading conferences.

I look forward to continuing this collaboration with program graduates to design meaningful applied learning experiences, like this one, that benefit teacher candidates, middle/high school students, and the classroom teachers.

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Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is in her 17th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools. She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.

Time to Bloom
Photo by Jenni Bader

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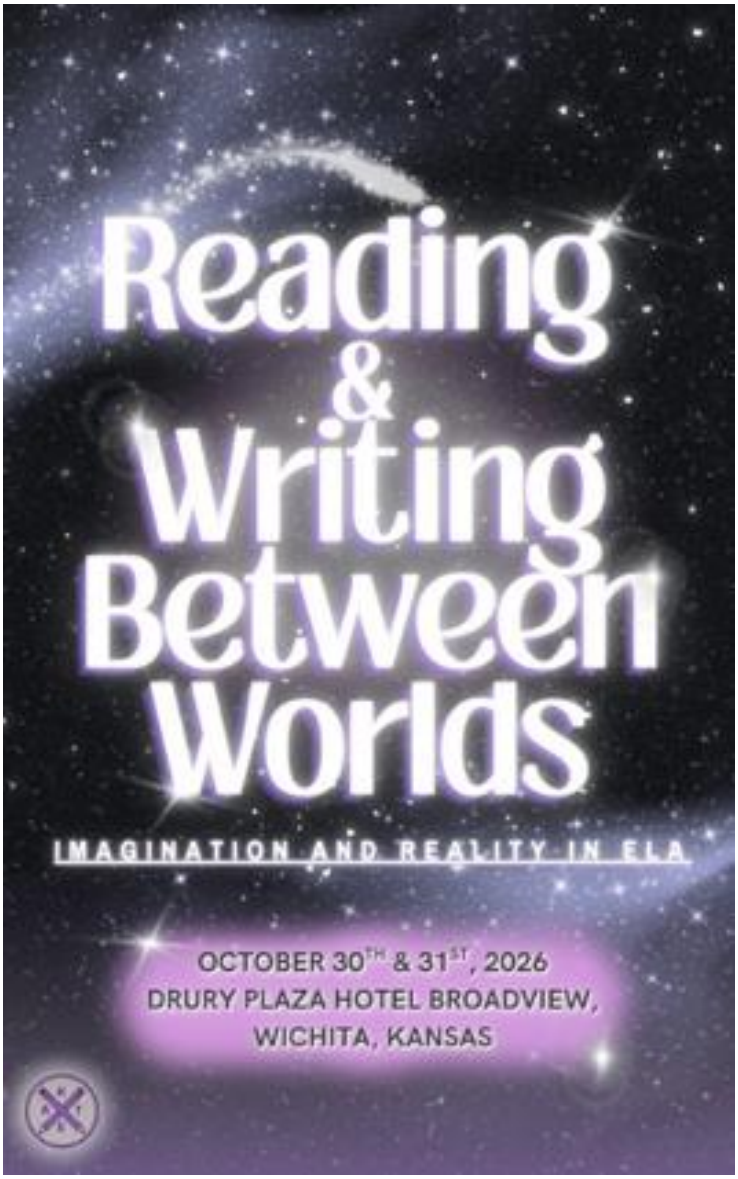

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