REVIVING THE ESSAY

How to Teach Structure Without Formula

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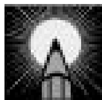

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-For Matilde and Johnny

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Foreword

Every house probably has a stash of trick birthday candles—you know, the kind that seem to go out, sputter for a second, and then relight. It's usually best not to use all trick candles on a cake, only one or two, to confuse the birthday boy or girl, who gathers in a second lungful of air and tries again. Most people get it by the third try.

It occurs to me that the tight five paragraph school essay bears a resemblance to these trick candles. No matter how hard we try to extinguish it, no matter how many times critics like Janet Emig have pointed out its limitations, no matter how many times we refill our lungs—it still springs back to life.

The standards movement has given it new life. As George Hillocks has painfully demonstrated, state assessment programs seem to evoke the five-paragraph formula no matter what kind of writing is being tested. So we get phony-sounding compositions that begin like this:

With all the crime and injustice in the world today, many young people need a hero or heroine to look up to. They need someone they can depend on and who can show them the difference between right and wrong. There are many important people in the world today who are good examples for kids, but the person I count on when I am having a rough time is someone very close to me who is easy to reach when I need her. My grandma, with her unique qualities and virtues has influenced me the most in my life.

I recently heard of an educational consultant in Colorado who was pulling four figures/day for showing teachers how the hamburger composition works. There's the top bun (the opening paragraph), the meat (the middle three paragraphs), and the bottom bun (the closing paragraph). The way I look at it, this approach is not simply an insult to students; it's an insult to hamburgers, which, after all, come in a lot of varieties—double cheese, cheese and bacon, etc.

The book you now hold, Gretchen Bernabei's *Reviving the Essay*, does more than any other book I know, to help teachers reimagine what an essay can be. I suspect that it will have more impact than many earlier critiques because it really offers alternatives, dozens of inviting opportunities for students to develop their thinking. For me a true measure of a great teaching book (like Kirby and Liner's *Inside Out* or Heard's *Writing Toward Home*) is their capacity to motivate, that gut feeling that says "I'd like to try this." This book passes that test.

It might seem paradoxical that a book devoted to revising the essay should be composed of so many lessons. After all, didn't Montaigne himself celebrate the "frenzy" of his own writing process. Yes, but he had also internalized the models of his mentors: Plutarch, Plato, Seneca. Not to mention that he was, after all, a lawyer, skilled at the kind of discourse he was subverting. He may have claimed that he was simply following the natural flow of his mind, but that mind was fully stocked.

Gretchen Bernabei recognized that the proper response to the narrow—dare I say anal—school essay, is not to disregard form and structure. It is not to simply create an open space for the "natural" flow of thought. Instead it is to replace one pattern with dozens of patterns. As teachers, we do not create a sense of possibility by simply effacing ourselves, by offering "freedom" without any guidance for how that freedom could be used. This simply inverts the problem, replacing rigidity with passive openness.

Instead, she offers a series of guided invitations that engage students with various patterns of development. She helps develop a repertoire of possibilities that can be altered, combined, even subverted and parodied. Creativity comes not from a mind freed of patterns, but from one supercharged with patterns.

It is especially gratifying for me to write a foreword to this book, as an earlier monograph I wrote has some role in its creation. What serendipidy to think that my short book, with miniscule sales, long out of print, could have this effect. And then I thought of Montaigne himself, writing in his tower. Could he ever have imagined, in his wildest dreams, that his own essays would, four hundred years after their publication, be such favorites of my father who would read them aloud in the late afternoon as he paced the floor of our house. And could my father have imagined the circuit that would lead from his reading, via my monograph, to this book.

It makes me think that the essay itself, as Montaigne imagined it, is the real spark that can't be extinguished.

Thomas Newkirk
Durham, NH

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Gretchen Bernabei

Introduction

It's funny. You can be musing over several unrelated thoughts for days, for weeks, or in my case, for years, almost as though your thoughts are footpaths leading off in different directions. Then in an instant, with all the fanfare of a quiet click, the paths all intersect, changing your world. That's what happened to me. Here's my story.

Unrelated Footpath Number One

My school district supervisor, Cindy Tyroff, assigned my first task as instructional support teacher last year, a one-year stint away from my high school English classroom. "Read through these," she told me, indicating three foot-and-a-half-high piles of sample student essays, literary analyses from the high schools in our district.

"What am I looking for?" I studied her face for a clue.

"Oh, just see what you notice." I looked at the piles. I knew they were a mix, some A papers, some B papers, some others.

"What should I notice?" I studied her face some more, but it didn't help.

"See what we're doing well, and where we need to go from here," she said, disappearing into her office.

I heaved the first pile onto the desk and began to read. About barbarism in *Lord of the Flies*, about prejudice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, about plots and characters and tone and symbolism. I wanted coffee. I wanted to commit hari-kari. I wanted another assignment.

Over the next several days, I read through more essays, and I saw some of the best of what we ask from students as they write essays about literature: punchy leads; correctly drawn MLA citations; multiple examples to support single points; apt vocabulary usage; clean organizational structures. But as I read some of our most "successful" papers, I also made myself a little page of notes that I didn't dare share. My notes felt like heresy, listing students' introductory comments that made me flinch, or phrases indicating that students had jumped through the required syntactical hoops without one shred of experiential understanding or heartfelt conviction. And the easiest of these to spot were endings: a second-person switchoff of quick advice, shallow counsel warning, for example, against barbarism. "So never be barbaric." Here are some examples:

> "Nothing Gold Can Stay" is a complete reminder of this and we must remember to live life to its fullest. Enjoy and take pleasure!
>
> The only way to prevent these disasters is to have an open mind towards others. Don't be too cocky.
>
> The most important moral in this novel is to accept that there will be adversity in your life and you will have to try to overcome it, even though it might be sad and difficult to succeed in.

> The main theme is respect others and don't discriminate against them for being who they are.
>
> Now since you have uncovered just a little bit of the crazy world of Odysseus what happened, characteristics and flaws, and things that just might freak you out. GO READ IT! You will be pleased.

But what exactly had we asked students to do? To conclude their thoughts. And these students had, clearly, but their endings didn't work, at least not for me. In fact, they revealed too much about the superficial nature of the essays.

What makes endings backfire? I thought back to a class I'd had with Dan Kirby. He had shown me how summing it all up in a "so here's what I learned" kind of way is too pat, too preachy, too thoughtless, too easy, and those endings ring false. They can ruin an otherwise thoughtful paper. But that's just the endings.

In short, these essays were deadly dull reading, but the drudgery seemed like *my* problem, not the problem of the essay writers or their teachers. Why? I quietly envied the polish I saw and thought, *These students' teachers know how to get finished-looking essays out of kids.* And the students had clearly accomplished their mission, completed the task, checked off every item on their essay to-do lists. I had worked in schools before where questioning these kinds of perfect-looking essays was only rewarded with cold, mute stares from the other teachers. So naturally, I felt a little funny about voicing my honest reaction: "These just don't seem very good."

An errand led me to my home high school, where I visited with colleagues before I returned to my essay-laden desk. As he was stepping into the lunchroom, Marcus Goodyear, a brilliant young AP teacher and friend, confided that he had spent the weekend dreading grading student essays. Finally, his wife Amy had said, "Marcus! You love reading. You love writing. You love those students. What do you hate so much about grading their essays?" Marcus looked at me and almost whispered, "They're boring."

Unrelated Footpath Number Two

Back in 1995, I spent six weeks at the Breadloaf School of English, studying the work of Lev Vygotsky. One among many of the lingering thoughts I took home had to do with the role of art. I had grown up on Aristotle and lofty thoughts about art (including literature) having to do with purifying my spirit through catharsis, but Vygotsky said something entirely different: We have art so that we can walk around it, staring, and seeing an expanded version of ourselves, of our human capacities, so that we can imagine ourselves in unimaginable situations. We have art so that we can rehearse, in a way, a future of the inexpressible.

There is the world, and there is us. Art shows us the world, and what we see changes us, giving us impetus to make changes in the world. It's a never-ending ricochet, helping us see how we fit into the world, extending who we are, helping us become people who can direct our wills, make plans, take action.

We have art for the same reasons we are compelled to slow down and look at car wrecks on the freeway. Oh sure, we don't want to be "rubber-neckers," but if you ever drive past a really bad car accident and don't stare, it's only because your self-discipline has overcome your natural compulsion to look. But why? What compels us to look? Maybe we think, *Because that could have been me.* Or *that could have been someone I love.* We have to know what it would look like, *if*.

Art is the same way. And this thought really changed for me the way I look at teaching literature. It taught me that barbarism in *Lord of the Flies* is more than the literary term *theme*; it's the *centerpiece* for coping with the school bus bullies of yesterday and for planning our votes for the world leaders of tomorrow. We teach literature because we have to survive.

Unrelated Footpath Number Three

As I was driving home from work, the familiar voice on National Public Radio mentioned something called "driveway moments." I listened:

> Maybe it's happened to you as it has to countless others . . .
> You're driving home, listening to a story on NPR. Suddenly, you find yourself in your driveway (or parking space or parking garage). Rather than turn the radio off, you stay in your car to hear the piece to the end.
> It's a Driveway Moment.

I almost laughed out loud. Yes! Many times I'd sat in my driveway, hoping my neighbors weren't noticing, listening to the words until the very last drop. Wouldn't our schools be different if the essays our students wrote had the same "Driveway Moment" effect?

The Footpaths Intersect

Cindy stopped by my desk, glancing at the essay piles. "How's it going?"

My confessions began. "I wasn't confused when I started, but now I am wondering about literary analyses. What are they supposed to be? Why do we have students write them? What do personal memories have to do with persuasive writing?"

We talked for a while, trying to arrive at the differences between real exploration and the school writing before us. "Tell them what you're going to tell, then tell it, then tell what you told."

I remembered a moment one evening, when I was driving to downtown San Antonio, the beer billboards glowing near the Alamodome. From the backseat piped up one ten-year-old voice, the successful result of the thorough, costly, nationally saturated, school antidrug DARE program:

Matilde: Mom, why do we have those there? Beer is a drug. Drugs are wrong.

Me: You're right.

Matilde: Then why do they let those signs go there? People will think it's okay to drink.

Me: I know. I wish our city would know what you kids know, and agree.

Matilde: How could they not?

Indeed. How could they not? Is the antidrug campaign just for school? I didn't want to purse my lips and say, "It doesn't work that way in the real world, honey." Why doesn't it? Why don't conversations and beliefs shape what we see on our highways? I think the bigger truth is that they do, and they will, but they won't if we don't have those conversations. Isn't that the nature of democracy?

What if we guided students who are writing school essays to think about what their moral is, how it connects to their life? Then, a possible new extension for the essay checklist might be to figure out what rules or laws we have about that particular issue. And to find out how our nation or community is addressing the same need the student is writing about. What dialogue are people having about that issue right now? Is the nation's work counter-productive to what the student thinks is needed? What if the student formed a real position about what should change?

School shouldn't stay within the walls of school. If we're asking students to connect to literature, why not use all the power of literature to make an impact on the world, not just comment on the state of the world? Not just to notice as observers, but to act on the world, to be participants, change-agents. I can't help but feel that whether it's a letter addressed to an elected official, or just the thoughtful ponderings of the student, all the essays students write could have an echo in the future, could be *conversation*.

Wouldn't it be a wonderful world if students were never asked to write bogus essays? And if they're writing meaningful pieces only, wouldn't those pieces routinely interact with the world?

Cindy disappeared into her office and reappeared, handing me a small, dark green book that looked erudite and boring. It was an ERIC monograph, published by the National Council of Teachers of English. "This might be interesting," she said.

I wasn't hopeful, but at least it gave me an excuse not to look at essays for a while. I was so wrong. Not about the erudite part, but about the boring part. It may have been the least boring piece of professional reading I'd done since my last encounter with Tom Romano. It was all about why school essays are boring, and about what real essays are supposed to be. I fell completely in love with the author of the book, Thomas Newkirk, and looked at the copyright date—1989. This had been in print since 1989, and we'd never studied it? Why? Well, in Texas, what were we doing in 1989? We were just beginning the thirteen-year run of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test, replete with rubrics that awarded high scores for formulaic writing and that had ended this year, 2002. I felt like Rip Van Winkle, ready to pick up where we left off, thirteen years ago.

My Mental Conversation with Thomas Newkirk

In his monograph, Thomas Newkirk told us about his daughter's school essay assignment and how she dreaded writing it. He looked at the assignment, and I'm sure it looked very similar to the assignments our students had faced, the ones that had produced the piles of essays before me. Newkirk wrote:

> We knew this writing was false, skilled at a superficial level, but false. It was not rooted in conviction, in the experience of the writer, and would therefore not enter the experience of the reader. It was what Jerome Harste has called a "textoid," an artificial creation. It was not an essay. The essay, I wanted to tell my daughter, was something different, something better, something looser, more personal, more playful.

Newkirk traced for me the genesis of that formulaic, front-end-loaded, schoolified essay. There it was, in Warriner's, just as I had learned it as a junior high school student. No wonder. I can read all the exciting, moving, meaningful pieces that American writers have been producing; I can sit in my driveway listening to language and thought from NPR; I can be mesmerized by articles in many commercial magazines; but when I start to assign students an essay, Warriner's training has stepped into the school spotlight. I fall back into teaching exactly the way I was taught, and a five-paragraph school essay assignment emerges.

So how do I ask students to write something different? How?

Newkirk showed me how the genre of "essay" began, as a form developed by Michel de Montaigne. I stopped at Barnes and Noble on the way home. Right there, on the first page of his *Essays*, Montaigne explained in 1580:

> My sole purpose in writing it has been a private and domestic one . . . I have intended it solely for the pleasure of my relatives and friends so that, when they have lost me—which they soon must—they may recover some features of my character and disposition, and thus keep the memory they have of me more completely and vividly alive.

"For the pleasure of my relatives and friends"? What student would feel that way about any of the essays before me? Would they want to leave those essays behind so that their loved ones would know them better? Most students I have taught would snort at the notion. So how do we convert the thinking students do about the literature they read into something personal and insightful about themselves?

The voice of Victoria Young echoed in my head. The director of our state's writing assessment, she had explained: "We're looking for a highly personal response which shows a genuine reaction to the prompt."

Was it possible? The state didn't want Warriner's any longer. They wanted Montaigne. What if we do what Thomas Newkirk urges, and reclaim the essay form? What

if we threw the schoolified Warriner's essay out the window? What if our students wrote essays that could give one chills?

I had just been reading *If You Don't Feed the Teachers, They Eat the Students* by Neila A. Connors, and this connected: "One person with a true belief is worth more than ninety-nine with an interest." Surely a Montaignesque essay would reveal the heart and soul of the writer more than a Warrineresque one would. So how?

We have to take what we know and rebuild. Newkirk gave me the mental image for my shifting essay metaphor. The schoolified essay is a building, already finished at the beginning; the real essay is a journey that goes somewhere. Whereas the schoolified essay asks students to start with a conclusion, a thesis, and use the rest of the paper to "back it up," the real essay offers a journey for the reader, or it doesn't work: "As readers, we experience structure as movement through the text; we are propelled from paragraph to paragraph or we come to a standstill, moving on only out of a sense of duty" (14).

Who, not counting English teachers, has that strong a sense of duty? Not the listeners on NPR. Not the readers of any essays in the real world. And that standstill is precisely why those schoolified essays are horrible to read.

"We experience structure as movement through the text." Movement through the text. How do we show students how to move through a text? For students who begin writing at a standstill, we have to begin with something. What if we could map out where the movement goes?

So do we find a better formula? A whole lot of formulas, so students can choose? The animated discussion around the lunch table at O'Connor High School led my friend Marcus Goodyear to jot down this thought on a napkin:

> Teachers and writers often seem to be on a quest to find the ultimate template or genre or list of rules, devices, how-to, so that we can find the tools to explain our process, and train new artists. But artists don't start with a universal template or genre. Sometimes they/we start by imitating—using one work as a template. Every work of art must be so unique that it becomes its own template.

Thick Description

When Newkirk mentioned Clifford Geertz, something in my memory stirred. Thick description. The phrase had appeared in a call for manuscripts in *The English Journal* back in 1991, asking for classroom case studies. I rummaged through my files and found it. Here's what I saw:

> The heart of the "case" consists of what ethnographers call "thick description"; i.e., anecdotes, transcripts or reconstructed dialogue, writing samples, contextual details, field notes, and the like.

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I remembered the whole 1991 experience. As a participant in the New Jersey Writing Project in Texas, led by Joyce Armstrong Carroll and Eddie Wilson, I had read that call for manuscripts and hauled it over to Eddie. "How much thick description would be enough?"

"How much do you want to include?"

"Do you think there'd be such a thing as too much?"

"I don't know . . . why don't you try it and see what happens?"

So I had constructed and submitted an article that was almost entirely thick description, alternating excerpts from a student journal with dialogue from my classroom. I remember experiencing writer's euphoria as the article practically wrote itself. I didn't need to say much, because the raw material did the talking. The article was published. I remember the writer's euphoria of seeing it in print.

Now I looked at Thomas Newkirk again. Had I used what I learned about thick description with my students? No, I had not. Not once in twelve years had it occurred to me to enliven student writing for readers' eyes by using what the National Council of Teachers of English considered a valuable readability tool. I couldn't slap my forehead hard enough.

In fact, it might be time to rethink art, literature, and essay writing, and to use everything we know as we reshape what it is we're asking students to do.

Vygotsky points out that art has a functional role in our world. The world moves us; we, in turn, move it. We are acted on by our environment; we act on it. It shapes us; we shape it. Something we read moves us; we move to influence someone else. This creates the constant push-pull of meaning and our lives. We're not just *finding* meaning in our lives. We're *shaping our world* because of the meanings that we find. Literature and all art are powerful tools for change.

As teachers, we are charged with the responsibility of leading students to make meaning in whatever is before them, whether it is literature, world events, or gossip, and to act on that meaning. To change the world. Yet our habit of teaching rigid, passive, formula essays or lessons only for school (not for the real world, honey) teaches students exactly how not to change a thing—how not to engage, how not to act on their world, how not to, for example, vote.

Some state assessments reward dead writing, schoolified writing, and so the writing programs in the schools of those states are guided by this. In Texas and a few other states, those years are finally gone.

So it looks to me like our work is clear. All the footpaths converged in my mind, synthesizing into these parts: There are four steps to writing a "driveway moment" kind of essay, not one of which is part of a schoolified essay:

1. Find your message, something that you believe.
2. Find (or invent) your structure.
3 Experiment with thick description, and design the presentation.
4. Try it on readers, and revise from there.

How? Those are the lessons that follow. Mr. Newkirk, you're on.

How Do I Use This Book?

Kids need three things in order to produce their most prized work: possibilities, freedom, and feedback. In our classrooms, if we assign the essay, and we choose the prompt, and we choose the structure, and we choose the feedback, we shouldn't really complain too much if we can't find the student anywhere in the essay. And we really have no right to complain if the essays all sound the same. Students have followed our directions.

Teachers need the same three things in order to produce our own most prized teaching: possibilities, freedom, and feedback. This book provides possibilities for teaching strategies all along the essay-writing path: step-by-step ways to show students how to address writing prompts; concrete ways to replace formula with possibilities of structure; models of ways to design a look and sound for the writing and reinvent prose; strategies for ways to listen to an essay and write for a reader's ear and to revise according to the feedback the writer sees.

The possibilities laid out in these lessons are accompanied by freedom. Every lesson has a brief introduction, followed by a "Teaching It" section, a transcription of one way that this lesson has been taught with students. Student samples from grades four through twelve are scattered throughout, with some teacher-written samples as well. The samples can serve as models, or as starting points, or as points of reference for teachers to see what other people's kids produced through these lessons. Teachers might choose combinations of lessons to try, and adapt them at will.

Finally, the most significant feedback we should heed comes from our own students. The lessons that work are the ones that produce writing that is more interesting, more lively. If variations of these lessons work better, then that's the feedback we should listen to and share with our colleagues. I'd love to see samples of what your students produce. Send some!

The book is divided into four chapters:

Chapter 1: Finding Your Message

What do students do when they're given a prompt? How can students collect their thoughts and come up with one really great thesis statement? Chapter 1 deals with finding a message for the essay. If your students are in the early stages of their essay writing, these lessons can help with the depth, focus, and believability of what their essay is going to say.

Chapter 2: Finding (or Inventing) Your Structure

Have the students settled on a message, and now wonder how to proceed? Chapter 2 will help with developing a plan for structuring their essay. Each lesson starts off with a graphic map of one organizational pattern. The lessons progress from the narrative structures that develop in the earliest writers to the more analytical and complex structures as abstract thought develops. Elementary students can use almost all of the structures successfully and shouldn't be confined to the first structures; likewise, the older students could make fine use of the structures all up and down the range of complexity.

Teachers are free to use the structures in any number of different ways, from freewriting to guided writing, as kernel essays or full essays. Models are given for both guided writing and kernel essays for each of the structures.

Each of these lessons is followed by a sample prompt, so that teachers might see what students would actually do with a prompt and that particular text structure. The prompts used in this chapter are taken from "Lightning in a Bottle," a CD compilation of prompts in English and Spanish, accompanied by photographs.

Chapter 3: Experimenting with Thick Description

Do the students have a message and a structure, and possibly a draft? Chapter 3 provides ways to dress up the essay with "thick description" by tinkering with chunks of text from the student's world, maybe weaving sound effects into it like an echo, or ribboning dialogue, poetry, or lyrics throughout, or framing it with a symbolic concrete object.

Chapter 4: Crafting The Essay for a Reader's Ears

The lessons in Chapter 4 can be used as revision strategies or prewriting visions about the role of the audience. This chapter focuses on getting an essay ready to be heard by others, on ways of getting the reader into the writer's skin.

In *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, James Moffett said, "We educators are learning to do better and better some things that should not be done at all. We are rapidly perfecting error. Which is to say that I think we should heed better the feedback we get about the consequences of our own teaching actions."

Instead of doing better and better the things that should not be done at all, let's revive the essay—the real essay, NPR's essay, Newkirk's essay, Montaigne's essay. Let's offer models. Let's invite imitation. Let's celebrate invention. And let's get ready for the students to knock our socks off.

1

Finding Your Message

Sometimes students are given the freedom to dream up their own topic to develop into a more focused thesis, assertion, or opinion. But more often, teachers give students a prompt to write about. This prompt might be in the form of a quotation, a "thought for the day," a question, or a thesis statement. And sometimes the state delivers a prompt on a state writing assessment.

When students hunker down to "write to the prompt," often the prompt itself appears in their writing at least once, many times as both the beginning and ending of their essays, with only bland illustrations in between.

Think about it. A prompt like "Write about how people are affected by the choices they make" becomes an essay that begins, "People are affected by the choices they make." Sure, sometimes a slick lead can camouflage the bare-bones response, but the student may never stray from the prompt, sticking to it so much that the resulting essay is devoid of any surprises or discoveries. And even if the student writer does a convincing job of sounding genuine, the main thought of the essay came from somewhere outside the writer, from someone else.

Testing results confirm the need for the students to unify their essays with something internal. Victoria Young from the Texas Education Agency explained that an essay is more focused and coherent if its unifying theme is "one step away from the prompt." TEA staffer Muffet Livaudais explained further what "one step away from the prompt" means. From the prompt "Write about what makes you happy," a student had written about eating pizza, going to the mall, and playing baseball. The only relationship those parts had was to the prompt. Each of those things made the student happy, but the parts had no relationship to one another. This made the piece not coherent, and the writer would most likely only get a 1 or a 2 on a 4-point rubric. The student could have used these three ideas if they had been linked to some other unifying angle, like "doing things with my family makes me happy," and then gone on to focus on the family in each of those three activities.

So the first step in writing an essay has to be for the writer to chew on the prompt, to read and reread it, to digest it, to find the hard-won truth in it, or the paradox in it, or the human struggle within it. Teachers use the words "narrow the focus," but the meaning there doesn't translate to students. However, students do understand what it means to locate and identify one real belief, full of passion and experience, from the prompt.

The lessons in this chapter help students transform a prompt into something of their own, something true. The reader will notice and sit up.

Lesson 1:
Truisms

Students need guided practice in order to find a unifying message for their essays, a truth, a life lesson, a mystery about the world. They also need guidance to develop a feel for more compelling or interesting thoughts.

To practice finding these, photographs provide a useful training ground, especially with developing readers. Students may have difficulty reading printed text, but they read body language and situations much more easily. They can read a photograph and make insightful inferences about what they see.

This progression of exercises, developed by Jayne Hover and her fourth graders, leads students to find their own natural angle to a prompt. It begins with showing them prompts that accompany photographs and teaching them to read the parts of the photograph in order to see the connection. When students get pretty good at that step, they go on to create their own statements to accompany photographs, statements that "nail" a human truth in the photograph, a truism. The last step removes the photograph completely and challenges students to first read a typical prompt, and then to sketch a quick image. Then, looking at their own sketch, they write truisms.

Teaching It:

Step 1: Get familiar with truisms with photo

(Put a prompt with photograph on the overhead. See page 5 for an example. Cover the photograph.)
"Look at this sentence. Do you think it's true?"
(Uncover the photograph.)
"How does the picture relate?" (Let them comment.)
(Put another prompt with photograph on the overhead. Cover the photograph.)
"Read this statement. What picture could be there?"
(Do a couple like this.)

Step 2: Write truisms from photo

(Show photo with prompt covered.)
"What do you see going on in this photo?" (Let students share what they notice.)
What's one true thing about the world that this photo shows?"
(Describe true things about the world, or about people. Share orally at first, then ask students to write them down.)
"Excellent! Let's put some of these around the room."

Step 3: Write truisms from prompts
"This time I'm not going to give you a truism or a picture. I'm going to put some plain words up. You look at the words and then make a two-minute drawing of whatever the words made you think of. Ready?"

(Write something on the overhead like "something exciting" or "something surprising" or something equally wide-open.)
"Read those words and draw whatever comes to mind. Even stick figures will be okay." *(Let two minutes pass.)*
"Now stop. Look at your picture the same way we looked at the photos on the wall. Think up a truism that you believe is true about the world or about people."
(Share and debrief.)

Debriefing Questions:

1. If a statement is true to me, is it going to be true for everyone?
2. The truisms that you wrote are so much better than the original statement with the photograph. Do you agree? How do you explain that? How can you tell they're better?
3. If everyone used the same prompt, would their essays all be very similar?
4. Would most people's essays be almost the same if everyone used their own truism?
5. Once you have a truism you really like, and you want to use it to write your essay, what might be your next step?

Spin-offs:

1. Reteach: Some student-written truisms will not be truisms, but will be about specific people or incidents. Refine the concept by reading a series of sentences, and after each ask, "Is this about one person? Or all people?" Examples: *I have a friend named Joe.* (That's not a truism about all people in general.) *Kids need friends.* (That's a truism; it's true about all people in general.) *The boy likes his friend.* (That's not a truism; it's not true about all people in general.) *Friends can make you crazy.* (That's a truism; it's true about all people in general.)
2. Talk through the students' truisms, allowing them to tell how they know the truisms are true. This is a great rehearsal for essay-writing.

3. Write an essay using a truism as the central idea.

4. After having read a piece of literature, let students write a truism and find a graphic to go with it and with the literature. Then ask them to write what that truism and graphic have to do with the piece of literature, or why they chose it. This is a wonderful, kid-friendly way to teach literary analysis. See the sample below.

Student Samples:

Truisms by twelfth graders from discussions without photographs

(contributed by students in Dottie Hall's English 4 classes):

Students were in groups based on their summer reading, which was in the biography/autobiography genre. There was an athlete group, a movie star group, a historical figures group, an artist group. At the beginning of the grouping they went around the circle and told who their person was and then talked about three interesting/amazing things they learned about that person. They took all of those and drew conclusions that turned into the truisms. So the truisms were collaborative.

1. In life's struggles, perseverance is the key.
2. Being in the public eye opens you up to criticism.
3. The actions of the past become the hands that mold the present.
4. Parents give us life but inspiration gives us the fuel to live.
5. Faith gives us the strength to stand up for what we believe in.
6. Illness can be your biggest competitor.
7. Criticism can weaken or strengthen a person's beliefs.
8. It's important to always remember where you came from.
9. Artists have nonverbal ways of expressing themselves.
10. Fame isn't always as glamorous as it seems.
11. Beauty is power.
12. The past can have many haunting truths.
13. The love for fame reduces the love for others.
14. To get to the top of the ladder, you must start on the bottom rung.
15. The stress of fame is equal to the ease of normality.
16. Love can be deadly.
17. All work and no play can make a person *insane.*

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Photo by Gretchen Bernabei

136. People create their own punishments.
La gente crea sus propios castigos.

Truisms by fourth graders from looking only at the photo:

The future is locked until its moment. —Wesley

Everyone has a secret. —Brandon

Even something so small can make a big difference. —Sallie

Small things can hold everything together. —Lindsey

If you do drugs, you'll get locked-up. —Donald

There's always a key in life. —Jessica

Everyone gets in trouble. —Brandy

Some things can't be opened. —Victor

Not everything is unlocked for you. —Joel

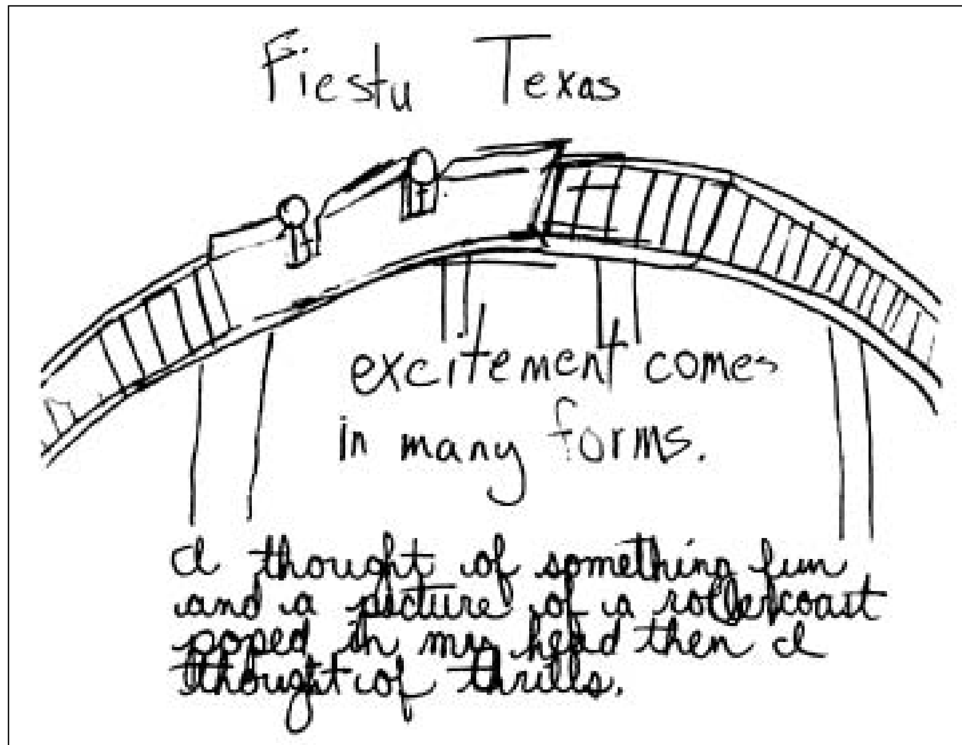
The truth will set you free. —Jevon

Not everything's easy to get through. —Roxanne

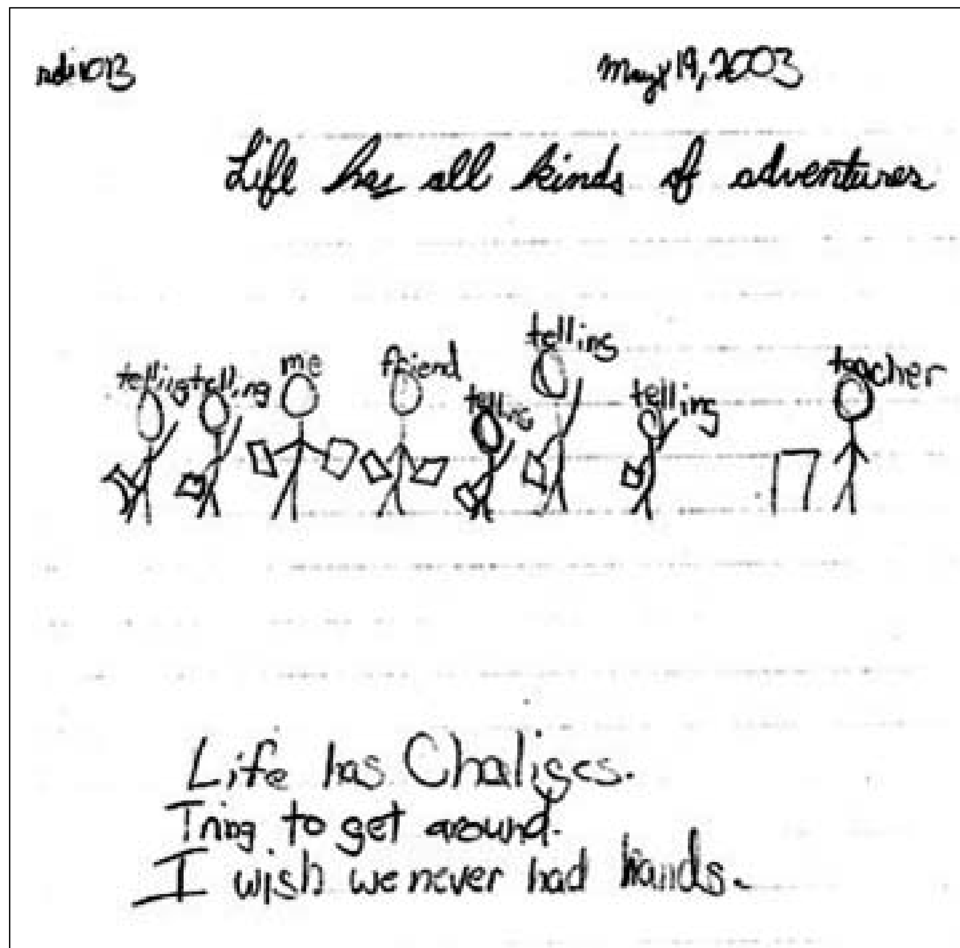
Unlock your freedom. —Derek

You have to work to find the key to life. —Hillary

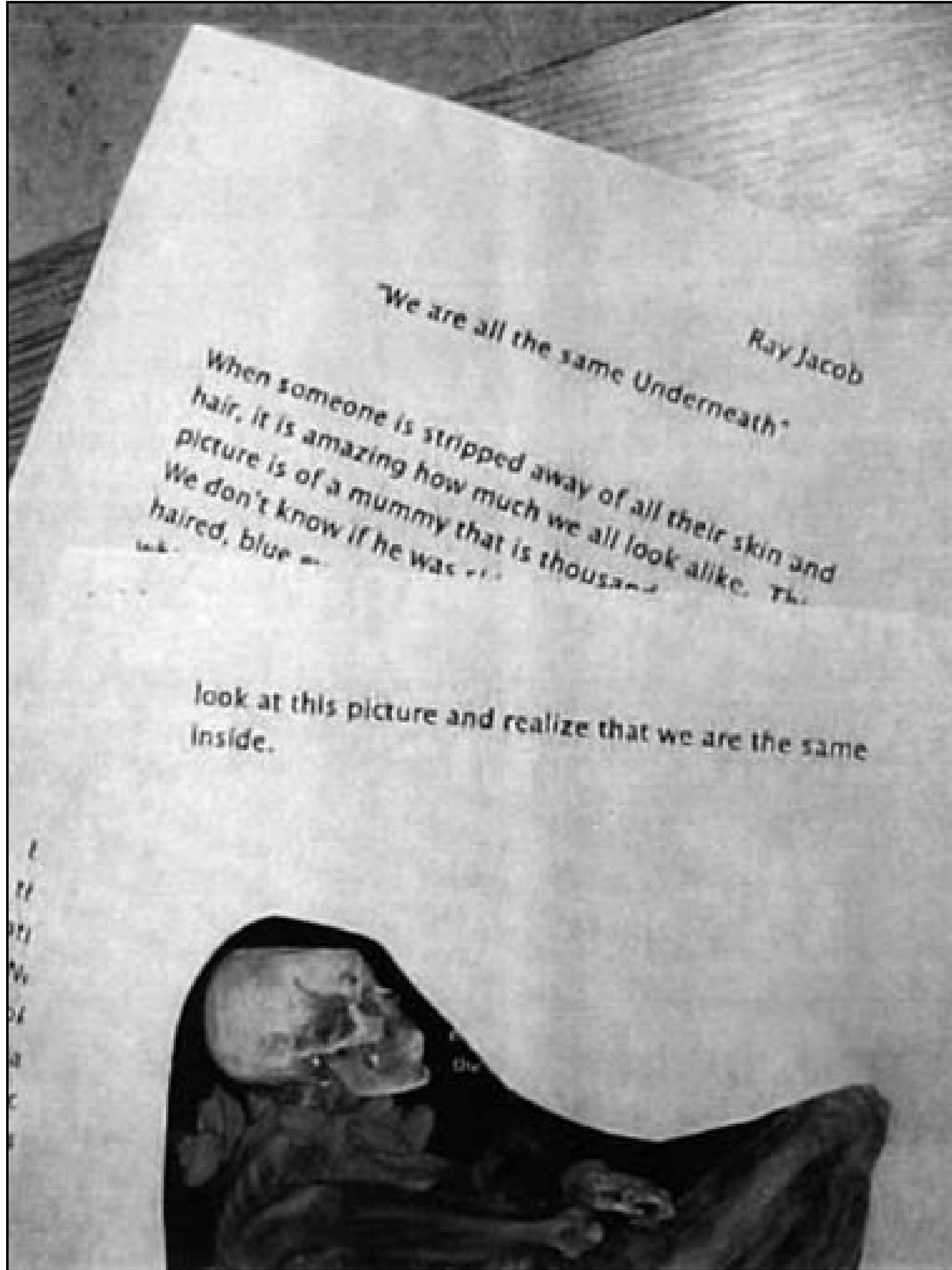
Some things are best sealed up. —Etan



A fourth grader looked at the prompt, "Life has all kinds of adventure." Next, she drew the picture. Then, looking only at her drawing, she thought of a truism: "Excitement comes in many forms." This sample demonstrates that students can come up with better prompts by looking at graphics, even rough graphics that they themselves produce. Sketching a picture, therefore, can be an important step for unity and focus, in between reading a prompt and beginning to write.



This fourth grader copied the prompt, “Life has all kinds of adventures.” He then sketched the first drawing that came to his mind, a classroom scene in which he and a friend were exchanging notes, and everyone told the teacher. Looking at his drawing brought him to a new truism, “Life has challenges.” His teacher asked him to try to come up with three potential truisms or titles, and he added, “Trying to get around,” and “I wish we never had hands.” Clearly, his story about the perceived betrayal of his classmates as an example of challenges in life would answer the original prompt, but with a personal, authentic, and engaging spin of his very own.



After reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, sixth-grade students of Suzi Lockamy found a graphic that they thought related to the book and wrote a truism to go with it. Their real thinking showed when she asked them to explain in an essay how they chose that truism and that graphic, and how they related to the book.

Full Essay by fourth grader about life's adventures:

Splash! Someone had sprayed our windows with a hose. Bobby, our sister Jenny's "karate dude" boyfriend, looked out the window. It was 8:07 p.m. Our parents were at work, and Owen & Tim went to a restaurant. (Owen is our other sister and Tim is her "military kick-butt" fiancé.) Maybe Owen & Tim are back, I thought. Jenny was probably thinking the same because she called Owen's cell phone. She looked nervous when she announced that Owen said she was picking up Tim's boxes right now.

Bobby was having a hard time seeing what was outside because every time he tried to look, the water splashed the window again. He and Jenny mumbled to each other. They led Frankie (my brother) and me to a bathroom where they told us to stay until they came back. I realized that they were checking for thieves or vandalizers and wanted us to be safe.

When they came back they rushed us outside in the cool night air and into Bobby's jeep. While we buckled our seatbelts I whispered to Frankie what I thought was going on. We both broke down crying because we were so scared. Jenny was frozen in her seat, and Bobby was doing his best to comfort us as he drove us around the neighborhood. I kept on picturing our house on fire while the silhouettes of drunk vandalizers laughed. "How can this happen to us? Nothing this bad ever happened." I thought. Frankie was squeezing me so tight I felt like I was going to pop.

Bobby was driving down a route that Frankie and I knew led to our house. "No Bobby, don't go there please! Don't go there!" Frankie and I begged. He just kept on driving.

When I saw the light on our porch on, I thought, "They are in the house. Lord, the robbers are in the house." I started sobbing hysterically. Frankie didn't though. In fact as soon as the jeep stopped, he ran out and hugged 2 figures at the door. Jenny came out with Bobby. I wouldn't come out though. I squished myself into a corner and Bobby had to carry me into the house. When I realized who the 2 figures were I was so mad and embarrassed that I yelled and tried to hit them.

They explained to Jenny and I that they were picking up boxes in the back-yard. They said that they weren't trying to play a trick, they were just trying to get our attention. They were no other than Owen and Tim.

- Frances Imperial, grade 4

For classroom duplication only. Enlarge at 121% for 81/2 x 11 sheet

Lesson 2:

Prompt Generator

When a class is reading a piece of literature, the "literary essay" can become daunting. How do we guide students toward a point in their essay? Some teachers think up a topic for discussion in an essay, commonly a theme found in the literature. Some teachers find essay assignments in ancillary materials provided by publishers. Sometimes students are given unfettered freedom to come up with their own topics, with less-than-stellar results ("There is lots of ambition in Macbeth").

The problem is that students need a meaningful topic for writing. And it can be tricky, convincing students to tie personal meaning to the literature they've read. A handy solution was developed by teachers Kristy Truss and Cyndi Pina. In this easy group or individual activity, students have a concrete, step-by-step method to generate their own focused topics from a piece of literature.

Teaching It:

You are focusing on one piece of literature (for example, Macbeth). What is this story mostly about? On the left side of your paper, make a list of five or six of the main issues that this book/story is about.
(Demonstrate a starter for the group.)
Macbeth, for example, is about greed . . . and what else? Yes! Ambition . . . about marriage . . . There are no wrong answers. (Pause.)
Now draw a grid on your paper like this:

	Good	Bad
Greed		
Ambition		
Morals		

In the next columns, think up and write down one good thing about greed.
(Demonstrate: "Greed can . . . get you moving.")
And in the next column, think up and write down one bad thing about greed.
(Demonstrate: "Greed . . . yes! Can destroy your health.")
Everyone clear? See if you can finish these.
(Share, compile, and publish on the wall or in typed-up list form.)

Debriefing Questions:

1. Was this easy?
2. Why are these sentences more useful than typical textbook thematic prompts?
3. How could you combine sentences together to create more complex statements?

Spin-offs:

1. Instead of focusing on literature, ask students to list the most important things in the world to them.
2. Substitute words from the following list for "good" and "bad."

   important

   curious

   silly

   surprising

   disappointing

   paradoxical

   sad

   confusing

Student Samples

	Good	Bad
Greed	Greed keeps people interested in life.	Because of greed, the progression of the human race has slowed down.
Ambition	Ambition gives us will and helps us accomplish our goals.	Sometimes we have destructive ambitions, like to hurt someone.
Morals	Morals help guide us down a path of good choices.	Not enough people have morals.