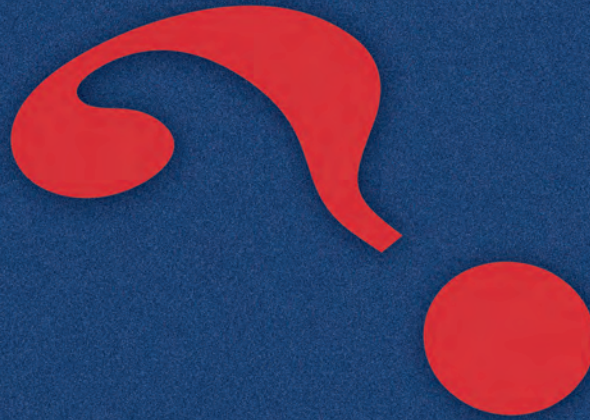


Foreword by Arthur Applebee

JIM BURKE



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Whoever said a dictionary definition is the most realistic answer to the meaning of something? I am not doubting the dictionary. I just find myself questioning what is absolute. I guess I am grateful for this because I feel that the ability to ask a question has been lost; whether it is asking someone what their favorite color is, to understanding where you come from. . . . I don't understand the fear of speaking and understanding. Because I believe being able to grasp and understand something is the key to learning.

—SARA BUCKINGHAM, BLOG FROM JIM BURKE'S SENIOR ENGLISH CLASS

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Jim Burke is always in the midst of dialogue—with colleagues in schools, with his students, with the larger professional community. That is how I first met him, with an emailed question about something he was writing, prompted by something I had written. And though we've gone on to become friends and colleagues, that first electronic interchange made a lasting impression, of someone at the center of things, asking good questions and seeking answers anywhere he can find them.

And now in this book, Jim shows us how that same propensity to ask interesting questions can and should lie at the heart of the curriculum—whether dealing with freshmen beginning their high school careers with some uncertainty and trepidation, or seniors who need a special challenge to stay engaged with anything other than their future lives in the closing weeks of their final semester. (Or indeed, the adult readers of this book, who are challenged with questions to guide their reading in an appended discussion guide.)

What's the Big Idea?, Jim asks in his title, and then goes on to show us how a focus on big ideas and enduring questions can, over extended periods of time, add depth and rigor to the curriculum, while simultaneously increasing student interest and engagement. Indeed, when we don't ask good questions, ones that provoke multiple perspectives and demand a careful mustering of argument, can we blame students when they become bored and disinterested?

Many people have written about how theory (or research) relates to practice; Jim is one of those rare professionals who lives the relationship. His book is rich with insights from other scholars and teachers, woven together in a convincing web of argument and insight. But the book is just as rich in classroom experience, using the wisdom of the expert practitioner to focus his arguments in the lives of his students—in all their richness and complexity. It is a perfect example of what I have elsewhere called “principled practice,” in which a master teacher's repertoire is guided by a deep understanding of important principles of effective teaching and learning.

Part of Jim's wisdom is recognizing that the devil is in the details, and as the chapters in this book unfold he pays close attention to the many demands any teacher must juggle. How to orient urban kids toward the landscape and people in *Of Mice and Men* (try Google Earth, and follow up with Dorothy Lange photos from the Internet); how to read all the postings from online discussion groups with thirty-five students in a class (don't; just scan the discussion and step in when a group is getting off track or lost); how to be sure that you are paying attention to all the skills that students will need to learn (use backward design, with his one-page Academic Essentials chart to monitor what has been covered); how to make students "test wise" without extended test prep (have students design and discuss their own questions).

In my own work with teachers, the issues Jim tackles here are among the most difficult. For many teachers, it is much easier to rethink one lesson or lesson sequence at a time than it is to rethink a full unit . . . and it is even harder to tie the unit together around an extended exploration of a question that matters. (It is also much easier to explore a theme with a series of activities unrelated to one another, which is why thematic teaching sometimes falls flat.) Jim's book does not make it *easy* to rethink a curriculum—indeed he is careful to chronicle the many different things a teacher has to consider—but it does make it seem *possible*. And this sense of possibility is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of a wide variety of teaching materials in reproducible format—everything from setting up summer reading assignments to traditional essays to multimedia presentations—together with extended examples of the work that students produced in response.

It is impossible to leave Jim's book saying, "but kids can't really do that," and equally hard to leave it wondering just where to start, because Jim gives teachers everything they need to begin this journey on their own.

—Arthur Applebee



WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

WHAT

WHY

Why Do Questions Matter in Curriculum?

An Introduction

Students enter school as question marks and graduate as periods.

—NEAL POSTMAN

The use of questions as a curricular framework is, of course, not new. Socrates used it, asking questions such as “What is virtue?” “What is justice?” and “What is good?” (Phillips 2004). In *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School*, Matt Copeland (2005) summarizes “Socratic questioning” as a means of using

... questioning to bring forward already held ideas in the students' minds, to make them more aware and cognizant of the learning and understanding that has already occurred. ... Socratic questioning is a systematic process for examining the ideas, questions, and answers that form the basis of human belief. It involves recognizing that all new understanding is linked to prior understanding, that thought itself is a continuous thread woven through our lives rather than isolated sets of questions and answers. (8)

Picking up on this notion of questions and Socratic inquiry, TedSizer (1985) called for instruction to be organized around “essential questions” that students would use to understand the big ideas in a course; that is, the ideas they would explore and grapple with through discussions, written responses, and ongoing investigations and research—all of which might culminate in a paper, a presentation, or some appropriate project or artifact. Sizer’s approach, which begins with the belief that every student can think critically and do serious academic work, is described in the following passage:

But where might an individual teacher begin? The starting point, as Grant Wiggins argues, is to “organize courses not around ‘answers’ but around questions and problems to which ‘content’ represents answers.” Such “essential questions,” as they are known, are an important ingredient of curriculum reform On every level, the “essential question” should shape the way students learn to think critically for themselves.

At Central Park East Secondary School in New York City, for example, the entire curriculum is focused on getting students to ask and answer questions like these: “From whose viewpoint are we seeing or reading or hearing? How do we know what we know? How are things, events, and people connected to each other? What in this idea is new and what [is] old? Why does this matter?” (Cushman 1989, 2)

Increasingly scripted, controlled curriculum has driven the instruction of many for some years now; results are clear: students show no clear gains in enduring knowledge or the deeper cognitive skills demanded by the workplace as a result of such test-driven curriculum. Throughout this book, I offer examples of questions—and lessons, units, and courses organized around those questions—you can use in your own classroom to increase engagement, understanding, and retention.

It is such generative thinking (Langer 2002) that Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) found in effective instruction in their research, concluding that “‘higher-level’ questions produce deeper learning than ‘lower-level’ questions” (113), especially when used “*before* a learning experience to establish a ‘mental set’ with which students process the learning experience” (114). Summing up the research on questions as they relate to reading comprehension and instruction


in the “dialogic classroom,” Nystrand (2006) reported that “discussion-based instruction, in the context of high academic demands, significantly enhanced literature achievement and reading comprehension” (400).

Nystrand continues: “What counts as knowledge and understanding in any given classroom is largely shaped by the questions teachers ask, how they respond to their students, and how they structure small-group and other pedagogical activities” (400). Looking further into questions and their use to improve classroom discourse and student learning, Nystrand has

. . . found that such discourse “moves” as authentic (open-ended) questions and uptake (follow-up questions) significantly enhanced the probability of both discussion and dialogic “spells” (phases of classroom discourse intermediate between recitation and open discussion characterized by clusters of student questions). Student questions had the strongest effect of all . . . [Nystrand also found that] authentic teacher questions and uptake, to the extent that they were used, suppressed potentially negative effects of macro variables such as track, SES, race, and ethnicity; this finding clarifies the critical importance of high-quality classroom discourse in English language arts instruction. (403)

Questions are the Swiss Army knife of an active, disciplined mind trying to understand texts or concepts and communicate that understanding to others. Some questions, like the biggest knife blade, do most of the work; other questions, similar to the corkscrew or leather punch, are more specialized, used only on rare occasions but essential when needed. It would be nice if we could just give each student such a set of cognitive tools and send them into the world; the truth, however, is that they need not only the questions themselves but the knowledge of which ones to ask and how and when to ask them.

To thrive as students in a “flat world” (Friedman 2006), as employees during the “Conceptual Age” (Pink 2006), and as citizens in a “post-American world” (Zakaria 2008), students need an intellectual flexibility that allows them to generate a range of questions as well as possible answers, to evaluate a subject from multiple perspectives. Costa and Ballick (2000) call such mental capacities “habits of mind”—a term the

 *Questions are the Swiss Army knife of an active, disciplined mind trying to understand texts or concepts and communicate that understanding to others.*

California State University (ICAS) also applied in its report on academic success (p. 8) in which they responded to the question, “What constitutes academic literacy?” by saying:

The dispositions and habits of mind that enable students to enter the ongoing conversations appropriate to college thinking, reading, writing, and speaking are interrelated and multi-tiered. Students should be aware of the various logical, emotional, and personal appeals used in argument; additionally, they need skills enabling them to define, summarize, detail, explain, evaluate, compare/contrast, and analyze. Students should also have a fundamental understanding of audience, tone, language usage, and rhetorical strategies to navigate appropriately in various disciplines.

Our study informs our conclusions about the complex nature of academic literacy. Competencies in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and in the use of technology . . . presuppose the intellectual dispositions valued by the community college, CSU, and UC faculty who teach first-year students and participated in our study. They tell us, and our experience confirms, that the following intellectual habits of mind are important for students’ success. The percentages noted indicate the portion of faculty who identified the following as “important to very important” or “somewhat to very essential” in their classes and within their academic discipline. College and university students should be able to engage in the following broad intellectual practices:

- exhibit curiosity (80%)
- experiment with new ideas (79%)
- see other points of view (77%)
- challenge their own beliefs (77%)
- engage in intellectual discussions (74%)
- ask provocative questions (73%)
- generate hypotheses (72%)
- exhibit respect for other viewpoints (71%)
- read with awareness of self and others (68%)

Central to each of these habits, though not always visible, is the ability to ask effective questions—some obvious and intuitive, others more sophisticated—

that we must teach our students how to formulate and use. Academic discourse is not, for most students, a natural, familiar language; rather, it is one that uses its own conventions and vernacular, one that requires students to cultivate a “disciplined mind” (Gardner 2006) if they are to graduate prepared to meet the demands of the workplace and the university. The *Academic Literacy* report, focusing on these same concerns about critical thinking, continues:

Generally, college faculty who participated in our study have concerns about the habits of mind of their first-year students. Among the narrative comments, we find assertions that students “are more diligent than in the past, but less able to tackle difficult questions, and much less curious”; “students today seem unwilling to engage in the hard work of thinking, analyzing, unless it is directed to their most immediate interests”; students “overemphasize the skill dimension of the discipline, and ignore the communication dimension,” and, regrettably, “they do not know how to seek help and demand attention.”

Faculty expect students to have an appetite to experiment with new ideas, challenge their own beliefs, seek other points of view, and contribute to intellectual discussions, all of which demand increasingly astute critical thinking skills.

Critical Thinking: The Cornerstone of Success

Critical thinking generally refers to a set of cognitive habits and processes. Thus, critical thinkers recursively engage in probative questioning, rigorous analysis, and imaginative synthesis and evaluation of ideas. Such thinking ability can be acquired through effort and instruction and is crucial to success in all academic disciplines.

Although the 9–12 California English Language Arts Content Standards call for students to identify, describe, compare/contrast, trace, explain, analyze, interpret, and evaluate, often students do not build on these abilities toward higher-order critical thinking skills. Forty percent of our study respondents indicated that their students’ “ability to tackle complex, analytical work” has declined over the course of their teaching years, a figure that rises dramatically with faculty’s length of service. The responses do not suggest the causes of such perceptions; but whatever those causes might be, educators want to avoid, as one faculty notes, “thought processes [that] seem shallow, like ‘sound

bytes.” While such sound bytes may characterize aspects of the culture at large, they do not characterize the academic culture, which prizes reflective habits of mind regarding critical reading, writing, listening, and thinking.


As one respondent puts it, “If [students] can’t write well, I don’t see evidence that they can think well.” Analytical thinking must be taught, and students must be encouraged to apply those analytical abilities to their own endeavors as well as to the work of others. Students whose abilities in critical reading and thinking enable them to grasp an argument in another’s text can construct arguments in their own essays. Those who question the text will be more likely to question their own claims. Frequent exposure to a variety of rhetorical strategies in their reading empowers students to experiment with and develop their own rhetorical strategies as writers. (ICAS 2000)

New concerns about academic readiness and engagement have emerged in various books such as *Distracted* (Jackson 2008); *The Path to Purpose* (Damon 2008); and Mark Bauerline’s detailed criticism, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (2008). Bauerline, whose book includes those critiques offered in the other books, sums up his argument thus:

The Dumbest Generation cares little for history books, civic principles, foreign affairs, comparative religions, and serious media and art, and it knows less. Careening through their formative years, they don’t catch the knowledge bug, and *tradition* might as well be a foreign word. Other things monopolize their attention—the allure of screens, peer absorption, career goals. They are latter day Rip Van Winkles, sleeping through the movements of culture and events of history, preferring the company of peers to great books and powerful ideas and momentous happenings. From their ranks will emerge few minds knowledgeable and interested enough to study, explain, and dispute the place and meaning of our nation. (234)

Some will argue that such high expectations are unreasonable, even impossible. I understand such concerns, yet I go to work each day in a district, as more and more teachers throughout the country do, that has made the state university entrance requirements our district’s graduation requirements, believing as Adler (1982) says, that “the education for the best is the best education for all” (6).

Moreover, in an attempt to inspire more students to challenge themselves at the highest levels, my district, as many around the country have also done, instituted an open enrollment policy that says anyone who wants to take Advanced Placement courses can do so. Thus teachers are challenged to teach *all* students at a higher level, sometimes taking a rather circuitous route to get there but guided by the belief that students can get there if they follow our lead. In the subsequent units, I try to illustrate how such high standards can be reached in both College Prep and Advanced Placement courses, with those at both ends of the spectrum in each class, and all those in between.

 *Direct and guided instruction in formulating and using questions helps demystify what highly effective students do.*

As is often, though not always, the case, successful readers, writers, and thinkers have learned to ask certain questions other students have not; direct and guided instruction in formulating and using these questions to generate, comprehend, analyze, and elaborate begins to demystify what those highly effective students do and thus builds in the others a sense of emerging confidence that this is work they *can* do once they learn how. As Adler (1982) wrote:

All genuine learning is active, not passive. It involves the use of the mind, not just memory. It is a process of discovery in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher. How does a teacher aid discovery and elicit the activity of the student's mind? By inviting and entertaining questions, by encouraging and sustaining inquiry, by supervising helpfully a wide variety of exercises and drills, by leading discussions, by giving examinations that arouse constructive responses, not just the making of check marks on printed forms. (50)

And it *is* work they must learn to do, for their—and our—economic success depends on it as a growing chorus is quick to remind us. Many in the workplace express their concerns about the need for intellectual abilities because they have a direct bearing on productivity, innovation, and overall success in the marketplace. As the National Council on Education and the Economy (NCEE) found in its landmark report, *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (2007), ours is a “world in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce” (xviii).

Increasingly, it is not the threat that jobs will be sent overseas that worries observers (Friedman 2006; NCEE 2007; Pink 2006) but that such jobs will be done by machines, even white-collar jobs, such as an accountant, once thought safe. Thus, as the NCEE report goes on to say:

Strong skills in English, mathematics, technology, and science, as well as literature, history, and the arts will be essential for many; beyond this, candidates will have to be comfortable with ideas and abstractions, good at both analysis and synthesis, creative and innovative, self-disciplined and well-organized, able to learn very quickly and work well as a member of a team and have the flexibility to adapt to frequent changes in the labor market as the shifts in the economy become ever faster and more dramatic. (xix)

Pink (2006) calls the current era the “Conceptual Age,” contrasting it with previous eras—the Industrial, when people were factory workers; the Information Age, during which people were knowledge workers—to argue that America must now, if we are to maintain our place in the world, become “a society of creators and empathizers, of pattern recognizers and meaning makers” (50). Fareed Zakaria (2008) places Pink’s argument in a larger, more global context. Of America’s educational system, he writes:

While the American system is too lax on rigor and memorization—whether in math or poetry—it is much better at developing the critical faculties of the mind, which is what you need to succeed in life. Other educational systems teach you to take tests; the American system teaches you to think. (193)

As Zakaria himself acknowledges, however, not all students are in schools where they are taught to think. Indeed, too often underachieving students have no opportunity to ask or respond to questions that would connect school to their lives outside; instead, these disaffected students are too often working to develop skills through a curriculum that offers them no chance to ask the questions that they desperately need answers to. Jackson and Cooper (2007) argue that teachers must

. . . switch their instruction focus from *what must be taught* to *what kinds of teaching will maximize learning*. Maximizing learning to reverse underachievement in literacy for our adolescents requires a change in the very definition of literacy itself; we must embrace a definition of literacy that:

- fosters engagement of behaviors vital to adolescents (making connections, inquiring, giving personal perspective, critically evaluating situations)
- incorporates authentic literacy—literacy relevant to students; and
- recognizes the critical role of a student's frame of reference in literacy development, enabling them to feel smart again. (248)

Thomas Friedman outlines his solution to these problems of disengagement and inequity, going to the heart of this book and its main premise about teaching: “Nobody works harder at learning than a curious kid” (2006, 304). Friedman offers his own equation to sum up his premise:

I have concluded that in a flat world, IQ—intelligence quotient—still matters, but CQ and PQ—curiosity quotient and passion quotient—matter even more Give me a kid with a passion to learn and a curiosity to discover and I will take him or her over a less passionate kid with a high IQ every day of the week. Because curious, passionate kids are self-educators and self-motivators. (304)

While the concerns of both the university and the workplace are important, another, equally urgent issue has emerged, the one Jackson and Cooper allude to earlier: the existential crisis many young people are experiencing. As Figure 1.12 shows, students today are, as Rilke said, “living the questions” and it is often a difficult experience, even for those who appear to have found a purpose.

Damon (2008) conducted a major study of purpose and found that

. . . only about one in five young people in the 12–22 year age range express a clear vision of where they want to go, what they want to accomplish in life, and why. The largest portion of those [they] interviewed—almost 60 percent—may have engaged in some potentially purposeful activities, or they may have developed some vague aspirations; but they do not have any real commitment to such activities or any realistic commitment to such activities or any realistic plans for pursuing their aspirations. (8)


Damon, painting a troubling picture of today's youth that extends, according to his research, well beyond the United States, identifies the

. . . most pervasive problem of the day [as] a sense of emptiness that has ensnared many young people in long periods of drift during a time in their lives

when they should be defining their aspirations and making progress toward their fulfillment. For too many young people today, apathy and anxiety have become the dominant moods, and disengagement or even cynicism has replaced the natural hopefulness of youth. (xii)

Echoing some of Friedman's previous sentiment about the role of curiosity and passion, Damon says the message that

... young people do best when they are challenged to strive, to achieve, to serve ... fails to address the most essential question of all: *For what purpose?* Or, in a word, *Why?* For young people, this concern means starting to ask—and answer—questions such as: What do I hope to accomplish with all my efforts, with all the striving that I am expected to do? What are the higher goals that give these efforts meaning? What matters to me; and why should it matter? What is my ultimate concern in life? Unless we make such questions a central part of our conversations with young people, we can do little but sit back and watch while they wander into a sea of confusion, drift, self-doubt, and anxiety—feelings that too often arise when work and striving are unaccompanied by a sense of purpose. (xii)

 *There are some very important existential questions students must have occasion to ask if they are to engage with their studies and develop essential comprehension and other academic skills.*

Although no one thing can ever be the solution to all problems, this book demonstrates the ways in which questions can address the concerns just outlined and develop in our students the mental acuity and fluency necessary to succeed in school and at work, as well as to achieve a sense of purpose in their personal lives.

As Damon illustrates and stresses, there are some very important existential questions students must have occasion to ask if they are to engage with their studies; Jackson and Cooper, in their research of underachieving students, arrived at the same conclusion, as have others who have investigated engagement and motivation (Smith and Wilhelm 2002; Guthrie and Wigfield 1997; Intrator 2005). Such questions, as well as others they must learn to ask, not only address existential needs but also develop essential comprehension and other academic skills needed to enter into the discussion.

All of the preceding issues and concerns seem to come together in the work of Howard Gardner, most notably his book *Five Minds for the Future* (2006), a

book in which he asserts that there are five “minds” “that are particularly at a premium in the world today and will be even more so tomorrow” (4). Gardner posits that the five minds are essential to our success and, thus, offer a crucial guide to teachers who seek to prepare their students to live in the world:

- The *disciplined mind* has mastered at least one way of thinking—a distinctive mode of cognition that characterizes a specific scholarly discipline, craft, or profession . . . [and] knows how to work steadily over time to improve skill and understanding.
- The *synthesizing mind* takes information from disparate sources, understands and evaluates that information objectively, and puts it together in ways that make sense to the synthesizer and also to [an]other person.
- The *creating mind* breaks new ground. It puts forth new ideas, poses unfamiliar questions, conjures up fresh ways of thinking, arrives at unexpected answers.
- The *respectful mind* notes and welcomes differences between human individuals and between human groups, tries to understand these “others,” and seeks to work effectively with them.
- The *ethical mind* ponders the nature of one’s work and the needs and desires of the society in which one lives. This mind conceptualizes how workers can serve purposes beyond self-interest and how citizens can work unselfishly to improve the lot of all. (3)

The assignments and examples included in this book reflect the kind of teaching that honors and, more importantly, develops these different minds while at the same time addressing the existential needs of students who must, if they are to succeed, master the content outlined in the state standards. Questions are the engine in such a classroom, for when students’ instruction is organized around meaningful, clear questions, they understand better, remember longer, and engage much more deeply and for greater periods of time.

Returning to our earlier analogy of questions as a Swiss Army knife, we might say that each feature of the knife represents a different type of question. Some questions are intended to analyze and evaluate; others work best to help us make different types of connections; and still other questions are more reflective, raising philosophical and ethical as well as personal issues important to students’ lives. Whatever their purpose, regardless of their particular type, questions help direct

our thinking and, in this instance, our teaching. Inherent in the very word is a sense of direction, an end toward which all our energies are directed: *quest-ion*. This purposeful aspect is perhaps most evident in one of the most fundamental uses of the question—the scientific method:

- Ask a question.
- Conduct background research.
- Construct an hypothesis.
- Test your hypothesis through research.
- Analyze your data and draw a conclusion.
- Communicate your results.

The Art of Teaching Questions

As students learn these questions—or, in some instances, sets of questions—they develop an independence of mind—an intellectual facility that serves them well whether reading or writing, researching or presenting, evaluating or analyzing, comparing or contrasting. Yet such questions must be taught to them; how to do this? Figure 1 shows a handout I created to use in both my freshman college prep English class and AP Literature class. Note several features of the handout, which is designed to teach students to ask not only different types of questions but effective questions (thus the examples and the qualities listed).



A full-size version of this handout, customizable and reproducible, is available at www.heinemann.com.

It is designed to be used initially as either an overhead, which allows us to work on these questions collaboratively, or a hard copy so that they can work on it individually or in groups. In addition, it includes the qualities of each type of question, and thus functions as a checklist for students to consult when creating their own questions; this list also serves as a rubric, allowing my students and me to check questions we are discussing against the descriptors. Also important, for students working at any level, are the examples. These provide a subtle means of differentiating the class as they provide examples of a range of questions, some of which are more sophisticated than others. Finally, in addition to providing a space for students to write their questions, it demands not only response (i.e., “write the answer”), but citation (i.e., “cite the page number”) and analysis (i.e., “explain its importance”).

Types of Questions

Directions: After reading the assigned text, create one of each type of question, accompanied by the additional information requested. Be prepared to contribute these questions to class discussion with evidence from the assigned text.

1. Factual Question

- Is verifiable—answers found on the page.
- Responds to questions: *who, what, when, where, how?*
- Takes the reader *into* the text.

Examples

- Who does Romeo kill?
- What does everyone in the book think Ultima is?
- Where does George tell Lennie to go if he gets in trouble again?
- When is the story set?

Write *your* factual question here:

Write the answer, cite the page number, and explain its importance below.

2. Inductive Question

- Is verifiable—answers found *in* the text, based on details and examples.
- Responds to questions: *why, how, and so what?*
- Takes readers *through* the text, allowing them to evaluate and interpret evidence from the visual, spoken, or written text.

Examples

- Why does George continue to care for Lennie after all the trouble he causes?
- How does O'Brien convey his attitude toward the war in this story?
- Why does Hamlet treat Ophelia as he does?
- How does Ralph's relationship with the others change by the end of the story?

Write *your* inductive question here:

Write the answer, provide the examples, and explain its importance below.

3. Analytical Question

- Connects the text to other texts, ideas, or situations through analysis.
- Responds to questions: *How are these similar, different, related?*
- Takes readers *beyond* the text, allowing them to analyze the relationship between this text and other texts, ideas, events, or situations.

Examples

- How is *Frankenstein* similar to certain modern problems we face today?
- In what ways are *The Plague* and *Blindness* similar and different?
- What does *Lord of the Flies* tell us about human nature?

Write *your* analytical question here:

Write the answer, provide the examples, and explain its importance below.

May be photocopied for classroom use. © 2010 by Jim Burke from *What's the Big Idea?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Figure 1 Types of Questions handout for creating effective questions

In a college prep English class, especially when introducing such strategies the first time, I would give each student a hardcopy, place the same sheet on the overhead, and focus on one type of question at a time. I might, for example, use this handout when students are reading their independent reading books or a selection from the Holt McDougal textbook we use, blocking out all but the “Factual Question” section on the overhead. After a brief discussion about what constitutes a fact—during which I make provocative statements like, “The Lakers are the greatest team of all time—is that a fact?” which I know *some* boys will engage with—I go over the examples provided on the handout, asking them what makes these factual questions. Following a brief discussion, during which I will correct or clarify any misconceptions, I create a sample based on my own reading (I read my own book while they read theirs during silent reading time). Again, we discuss my question, how I might answer it, and what makes it important.

It is this last step—“evaluate its importance”—that is the most difficult for students, especially inexperienced readers. They often confuse importance to *them* with importance to the *story*, believing that because they had a similar experience it is important, instead of understanding that certain details are essential to the story’s structure. This is something I often must take extra time to clarify usually by asking students, “How do you determine if something is important to the text?” When someone says something like, “If you took it out it would be a completely different story,” I know we

are on the right track because this gives them a useful question to evaluate importance and gives us one we can use as a class to check our thinking.

After they have seen me use the handout, it is time for us to try one together. Using whatever common text we are reading at that time (for example, *Of Mice and Men*), we create some sample factual questions together, evaluating them according to the criteria outlined on the handout to determine *if* they are factual questions and how important they are. After successfully developing some questions together, I turn them loose to create their own, after which they must check with each other to evaluate them, nominating from their group the best question so that we can further discuss it.

Thus we have a three-step process to follow for most instruction: I do it (teacher models); we do it (create one together); they do it (independently). Once



We have a three-step process to follow for most instruction: I do it (teacher models); we do it (create one together); they do it (independently).

they have mastered the chosen type of question (in this case, the factual question), we move on to learn about the other types in subsequent days or weeks according to the class' needs and abilities. Anticipating criticism of this model, Vygotsky (1986) would counter that while some dismiss "imitation [as] a mechanical activity that anyone can imitate . . . it is necessary to possess the means of stepping from something one knows to something new. With assistance, any child can do more than he can by himself—though only within the limits set by the state of his development" (187).

What does this process look like in a more advanced class? In short, it is much more efficient: I give my AP class the handout and ask them to develop one of each type of question about, for example, *Heart of Darkness* or *Their Eyes Are Watching God*. Whether they do this in class or for homework, the end is the same: To get them to take responsibility for their understanding and the subsequent discussion. I will usually have them get into groups to share their questions, telling them to first compare what they asked, then choose what they feel is the best question from their group. Once they have made that selection, I want them to be prepared to explain *why* that is the "best" question, then to use it to guide their own small-group discussion.

After they have had sufficient time to have a small-group discussion, during which time I am wandering around to evaluate their questions and the ensuing discussion, we convene as a full class and use their questions to guide a larger discussion. During such discussions the questions themselves are as much a part of the conversation as students' responses to them.

In some classes, especially those with more urgent instructional needs, I take a more intensive approach. Figure 2 shows an overhead from a program called *Academic Workout* (Burke 2007). While I follow pretty much the same steps just outlined when using this particular overhead, I ask students to work with it more closely, developing posters that describe the type of question and providing examples of that type of question in different subject areas (see Figure 3a and 3b). This deepens students' understanding of that question and their ability to generalize it into other areas.

Posters like these then remain on the wall for future and quick reference; they allow me to say, "take a minute and create a 'Think and Search' question about the chapter we have been discussing." The questions they develop then serve both to assess their understanding and to guide the discussion of the text,

STUDY SKILLS

82. Types of Questions

You may be asked four types of test questions. Each type requires its own special way to find the answer.

1. "Right There"	Sometimes these are called factual questions . These questions often use the same wording from the passage, which makes it easy to skim the text for the answer.
2. "Think and Search"	These are interpretive questions . Search, or skim , for ideas presented throughout the text and think about how they all go together.
3. "Author & You"	The answer to these questions is not in the text. You need to make an inference by adding what you learn from the author to what you already know.
4. "On My Own"	You can answer these questions without details from the text. The answer is based on your experiences.

Model

1. Right There What is the name of the team Greg wants to join?

2. Think and Search Why had Greg not been allowed to play for the high school team?

3. Author & You Why does Greg have a hard time in school?

4. On My Own Why do rewards motivate teens to work harder in school?

It wasn't often the Scorpions took on new players, especially 14-year-olds, and this was a chance of a lifetime for Greg. He hadn't been allowed to play high school ball, which he had really wanted to do, but playing for the community center team was the next best thing. Report cards were due in a week, and Greg had been hoping for the best.

Source: from "The Treasure of Lemon Brown" by Walter Dean Myers



Figure 2 The Types of Questions handout

From *Academic Workout: Reading and Language Arts*, 2007 (Curriculum Associates: North Billerica, MA).

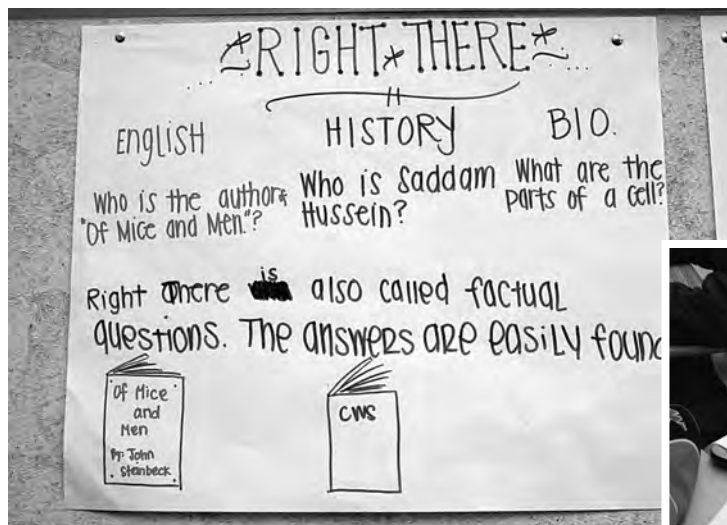


Figure 3a Detailed view of the "Right There" poster

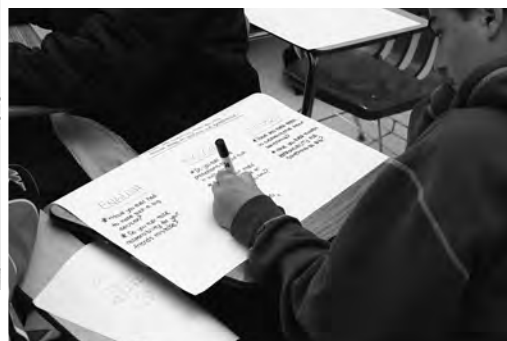


Figure 3b Student drawing the "Right There" poster

ensuring that we are discussing aspects of it that interest students, while providing a more authentic context in which we can help them shape their own questions and raise them without dominating the discussion.

Other types of questions emerge naturally, usually appropriate to classes at all levels with some differentiation but often centered on issues of comprehension, importance, causes, effects, features, functions, and craft. In my AP Literature class, for example, we reached a point when reading *Crime and Punishment* where I felt we needed to pull back and look at the big picture—it was getting a bit fuzzy after four hundred pages. The goal was to determine the key events ("What happened?") and their importance ("Why is this important?/So what?").

To make it a bit more interesting and to get them to process the ideas on different levels, I created a timeline on the board (see Figure 4) and gave each student two sticky notes (one yellow, one blue). On the blue one, students wrote down the most crucial event that had *not* yet been identified on the board; on the yellow sticky note, they explained why this event was so important. Students arranged them on the board (see Figure 5) in chronological order, after which we used these to facilitate the discussion as a whole class.

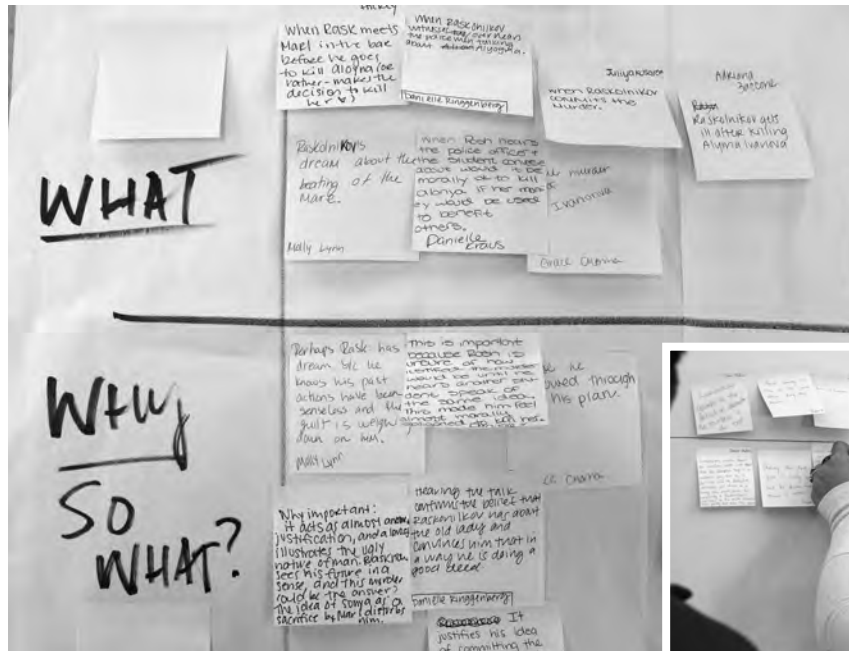


Figure 4 A sticky note timeline: Notes on the top are blue; those on the bottom are yellow. Every student gets on of each color.



Figure 5 Toni posts her comments on the *Crime and Punishment* timeline.

Guiding Instruction Through Essential Questions

We are used to thinking of questions as things kids answer on tests or at the end of the chapter they read. Such test questions and study questions are not without value; however, questions can accomplish much more than merely checking what students learned or read. Throughout the book, my focus is on how to develop and use questions to:

- Prepare and help students participate in effective classroom discussion
- Connect what they learn to themselves, the world, and other texts or units they have studied
- Clarify and extend thinking about a subject
- Assess and deepen understanding of material
- Generate ideas and insights through reading, writing, representing, and discussing
- Organize instruction around big ideas and essential questions

It is this last idea—organizing instruction around big ideas and essential questions—that I want to explore in more detail because it is the central argument of this book. Structuring our “curriculum as [a] conversation” (Applebee 1996) will address three of the biggest challenges we face: engagement, comprehension, and retention. I do not mean to offer up this idea of curricular conversations as a silver bullet; as Applebee writes:

It seems misguided to expect that an entire educational experience can be encompassed within one grand conversation—there are after all many different traditions of discourse that are valued in our culture, and a variety of intellectual tools that we hope students would master. On the other hand, there are real relationships among many of the separate conversations that now form the curriculum, and finding ways to examine their commonalities and differences can only be enriching. (83)

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) further validate the importance of big ideas in *Understanding by Design*, arguing that “big ideas . . . should be the focus of education for understanding. A big idea is a concept, theme, or issue that gives meaning and connection to discrete facts and skills” (5). Research on brain-based teaching (Jensen 2005; Willis 2006) consistently shows that such integrated, meaningful instruction is not only “enriching,” but also highly effective in terms of engaging learners and teaching concepts.

The big question, of course, which Arthur Applebee and many others have tried to answer through their research, is *how* to create and sustain such conversations while at the same time teaching the skills and background knowledge needed to participate in them. In *Curriculum as Conversation*, Applebee goes on to say: “In helping students enter into curriculum domains, finding an initial topic or direction for conversation is critical. . . . It seems that most successful topics could be expressed as broad questions that invite discussion and debate across a broad domain of experiences” (1996, 83).

In her extensive research of middle and high school literacy instruction, Judith Langer (2002) found that “overt connections are constantly made between knowledge, skills, and ideas across lessons, classes, and grades” (23). Langer further emphasizes the importance of students connecting their learning in several distinct ways: “within lessons, across lessons, and across-in-school and out-of-school applications”; she concluded that “88 percent of effective teachers . . . make all three kinds of connections” (23).

Such connections, when based on questions students are “driven” to answer, play to the brain’s strengths, allowing the students to “prime the pump” (Willis 2006) by asking “open-ended questions that do not have a single, definite, correct answer” (42), thereby becoming more “connected to their interests and experiences, [which keeps students] interested, especially if they receive encouragement for expressing their ideas” (42).

Alfred Tatum, in *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap* (2005), reinforces the crucial role of such connections to students’ interests and culture. Specifically, he suggests the following actions to engage and support African American boys (though I would add that *all* students benefit from these recommendations):

1. Engaging students with text and discussions about real issues they, their families, and their communities face, where students can analyze their lives in the context of the curriculum and discuss strategies for overcoming academic and societal barriers.
2. Using meaningful literacy activities that address students’ cognitive and affective domains and that take into account the students’ culture.
3. Connecting the social, the economic, and the political to the educational.
4. Acknowledging that developing skills, increasing test scores, and nurturing students’ identity are fundamentally compatible.
5. Resolving the either-or dilemma of focusing on skill development or developing intelligence (54).

Tatum (2005) suggests such questions, and the freedom to ask them, determines the extent to which the student feels included in the class and curriculum. Echoing Neil Postman’s remark that “all students [enter] school as questions,” Tatum argues that *all* students come to school with questions they need to ask and discuss; however, if the teacher makes no room for such questions, students, especially African American boys, will feel shut out, unwelcome, and so turn away from the class—dismissing it as they feel it has dismissed them. Our students need us to listen to their questions. Their success, and ours, depend on it.

Let me end by returning to Gardner’s “five minds for the future.” Our students enter our schools and classrooms as apprentices once did a master’s workshop or studio. Nystrand and others want us to cultivate in our students a “literate mind,” which Judith Langer defined thus: “The kind of literate mind I care about involves the kind of thinking needed not only to do well in school, but outside of

school—in work and life. It is the kind of mind people need to do their jobs well, to adjust as their jobs change, and to be able change jobs when they need or want to” (2002). In this same address, Langer elaborated on her notion of being literate in the modern world:

I see being literate as the ability to behave like a literate person—to engage in the kinds of thinking and reasoning people generally use when they read and write even in situations where reading and writing are not involved (such as the ability to inspect and analyze meanings from a variety of vantage points with or without texts—whether they have seen a movie or read a play, the mental act itself is a literate act). I call this ability “literate thinking.”

This view of literacy assumes individual and cultural differences and societal changes over time. It suggests that people use what they know and have experienced as a starting place for learning. It lets them start by manipulating their knowledge of content and their knowledge of language in ways that help them think and rethink their understandings. From this perspective, thinking and awareness are learned in the context of ideas and activities. My studies show that students who use literate thinking when no text is present can more easily learn to use it *with* text as well. This is a very different notion of literacy than thinking of literacy as the acquisition of a set of reading and writing skills and facts; and what one values as being smart and learning well, as well as how to teach and how you test it, are very different, as well.

Langer’s observations about the literate mind recall Gardner’s “five minds of the future”—the disciplinary, synthesizing, creating, respectful, and ethical minds he concludes are fundamental to the new world—but extend his notions of an educated mind which, he argues, is “likely to be crucial in a world marked by the hegemony of science and technology, global transmission of huge amounts of information, handling of routine tasks by computers and robots, and ever-increasing contacts of all sorts between diverse populations” (163).

In her final remarks about the literate mind, Langer says what I hope the rest of this book will help to enact: “I also want [students] to have choices—to be able to gain knowledge and learn new skills throughout their lives, to explore possibilities and ponder options as they shape and reshape their own lives and the world around them.” That is what I want my class to accomplish, my students to leave knowing and having learned. Such a mind, prepared for whatever the future holds, is what the world expects, what the world needs—and what my students deserve.



1

An Intellectual Rite of Passage

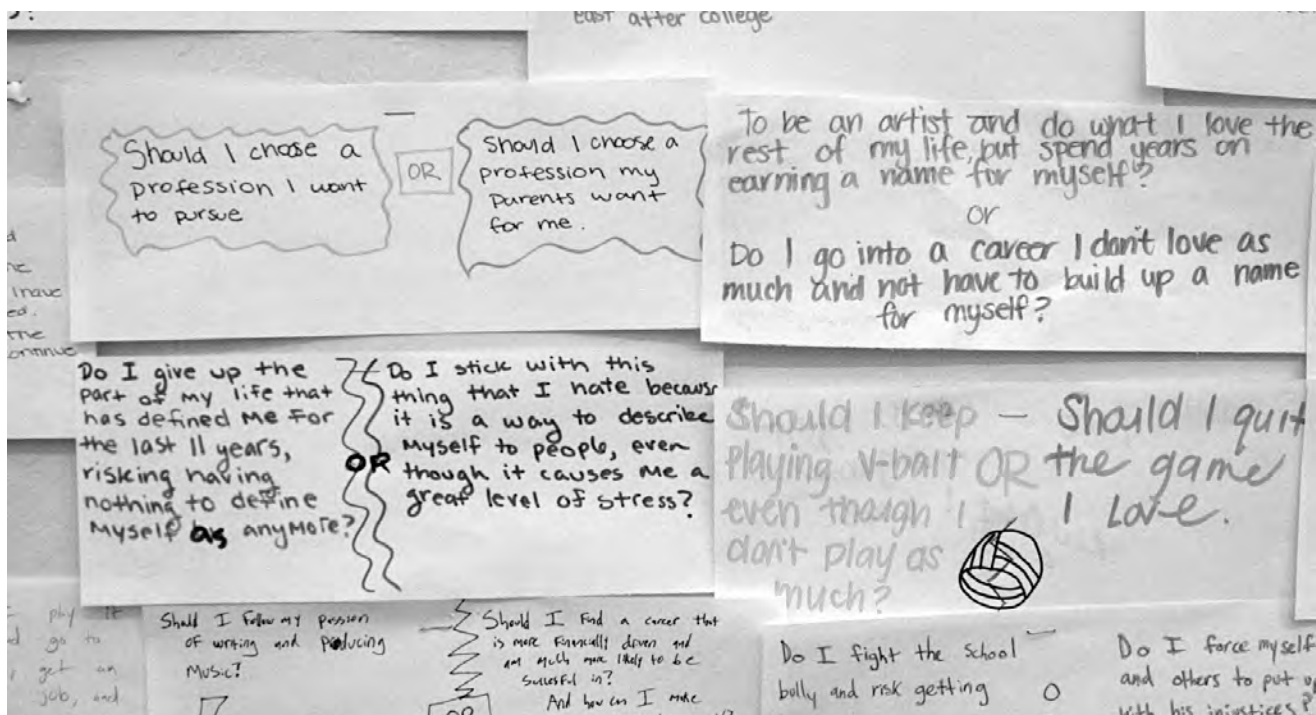
Engaging Students with Essential Questions

The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

Let us begin with the end: final exams and all that leads up to those last days in my freshman and senior English classes. After all, we often judge experiences based on how they end, not how they begin. Many counsel us, in both our personal and professional endeavors, to “to begin with the end in mind [which] means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now so that the steps you take are always in the right direction” (Covey 1989, 98).

Applying this notion of “backward design” to curriculum design, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) pose a series of design questions I hope the rest of this book will answer with useful examples from my own classroom:



- What should students understand as a result of the activities or the content covered?
- What should the experiences or lectures equip students to do?
- How, then, should the activities or class discussions be shaped and processed to achieve the desired results?
- What would be evidence that learners are en route to the desired abilities and insights?
- How should all activities and resources be chosen and used to ensure that the learning goals are met and the most appropriate evidence produced?
- How will students be helped to see *by design* the purpose of the activity or resource and its helpfulness in meeting specific performance goals? (17)

Wiggins and McTighe summarize these questions and their backward design process in three stages: “(1) Identify the desired results; (2) Determine acceptable evidence; and (3) Plan learning experiences and instruction” (18).

Perhaps my favorite and most useful question of all is, “What is the problem for which x is the solution?” This is a question that clarifies even as it challenges, helping me cut through the rationalizations that come so easily to so many of us

as we are planning our classes, envisioning our semesters from the relative tranquility of those last weeks of summer and/or winter break.

For me, as for most of you reading this book, I face *several* problems for which the spring semester final exam is the solution:

- Students grow increasingly disengaged, especially seniors, as the year comes to an end.
- Students have knowledge and skills, mandated by state standards, that they must learn and demonstrate to their teachers.
- Students have all sorts of skills and interests that school often does not give them occasion to use or pursue, thus rendering the curriculum too often impersonal and, in the eyes of many students, irrelevant.
- Students face increasingly complex personal and professional demands that we must play our part in preparing them to meet, especially as they relate to working, thinking, and communicating.
- Students need assignments and assessments that develop and measure enduring understandings not surface skills or facts they will forget by the time they finish taking the final exam.

Of course, these concerns are not, by any means, limited to the end of the year; while these challenges grow in April and May, they are with us from the moment the kids enter the class in the fall.

These expectations are all well and good, but *what does it look like* to “teach with questions”? To answer that you will have to come into my senior English class in the final weeks of the year. While it would be somewhat logical to begin with my freshman class, I think it’s best to go right to the most dangerous place on the map: second semester seniors. A little background is useful: These are Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature classes of thirty-three students, all of whom plan to attend colleges (from junior college to Harvard), have completed the AP exams, and now have only two weeks until they graduate. We’ve worked hard all year to improve their analytical reading and writing, during which time they have communicated their insights through multiple means and media, as well as in small-group and full-class discussions.

But it’s late May on the California coast, the sun is out, and their attention is often as minimal as their clothing. But *I* don’t have senioritis, and I want my days spent doing meaningful, engaging work that still has one last chance (do we *ever* give up?) of making that difference; of doing that assignment that years later students will say, “You know, right at the end of my senior year I had to do this as-

signment and it got me thinking and ended up being the most important thing I did in high school. . . .”

Despite all these challenges, the finals begin, spread out over a week, and great things happen (most of the time). Despite Postman’s dour assessment that students “enter as question marks and graduate as periods,” my seniors are concluding semester-long investigations guided by big questions such as:

- How do you measure and maximize human worth?
- How does war affect those who experience it and their families?
- What does the future look like?
- What most influences the choices we make?
- How does the environment in which we live or are raised shape us?
- How and why does our relationship with our parents change as we grow up?

It is this last question that was posed by Claire, whose grades in the home stretch embody the increasingly disaffected seniors (who are “so out of here” as they would say). We will examine the question in detail, but it will be useful to know what the actual assignment was before we see what Claire and the others did for this final assignment. Figure 1.1 shows the handout I gave the students in January.

Here is a sample proposal submitted by one of my students:

**AP Inquiry Project:
Independent Reading Requirement Proposal**

Danielle Bakhtiari

Subject of Inquiry: Murder and dehumanization of innocent people from different places in the world. (Cambodia, Sudan, and Dominican Republic)

Guiding Question: What enables humans to survive the horrors found in other parts of the world? How and why are people from these different places mistreated and stripped of their humanity?

Rationale: Personally, I was looking for stories that are appealing and interesting. We do not always hear about these faraway places that have corrupt governments, no money, and people struggling to survive day by day. These three books will give me an insight about a world of different innocent people struggling to survive the harsh realities. This will also teach me to learn about and be thankful for where I live and remember there are places where things are bad and the people need help.



A full-size version of this handout, customizable and reproducible, is available at www.heinemann.com.

AP Inquiry Project: Independent Reading Requirement and Spring Final

Overview: Each of you has subjects of particular interest to you that school rarely gives you the opportunity to investigate. This assignment outlines the second-semester reading requirement. The purpose of this semester's independent reading assignment remains the same as it was last semester:

to prepare you for the AP exam on May 8. In addition, however, I want each of you to leave your senior year having investigated a topic of great personal interest in depth, by using several different books you choose.

Requirements

Each student must:

- Read *three* books by semester's end, all of them AP-level novels (though you can, if you wish, substitute one novel with a relevant nonfiction book).
- Read one book per grading period.
- Write in-class essays on the first two books as we have done all year; these essays will be based on your own BQs (Big Questions).
- Submit a written proposal that includes everything outlined below.
- Investigate your subject through at least three other sources, all of which must be included in your bibliography.
- Perform, produce, or present your final project; it must incorporate all *three* books (during the last week of the semester and on the day of the final).
- Turn in a typed annotated bibliography of independent books that includes:
 - Introduction that clearly identifies the Big Question you sought to answer this semester, *briefly* explains *why* this subject interests you, and identifies (in *bullets*) the three main conclusions you drew from your study of this topic through these books.
 - Title, author, publisher, publication date, city, and number of pages (i.e., complete and proper citation information for each book).
 - Approximately seventy-five (75) words that explain not only what the book was about but also how it related to your Big Question.

Proposal

Each student must submit a typed, one-page proposal (see example on the back) by next Monday; it should include the following:

- *The subject of your inquiry* (nature, science, relationships, Africa, self-image)
- *A guiding question* (or questions) about this subject (e.g., What is mankind's place in the natural world?)
- *A rationale* for why you want to study this subject all semester
- *A summary* of what you know about this subject at this time
- *A prediction* about what you think you will discover during your investigation
- *The titles and authors* of the three books you will read this semester
- *A discussion* as to the importance of this subject (which answers the questions, "So what?")
- *Other possible sources* (websites, publications, people, organizations) you might consult to satisfy the three "additional sources."

Sample Set

Here is a sample set of three books you might read as part of this investigation:

- *The Places in Between*, Rory Stewart
- *What Is the What?* Dave Eggers
- *The Sheltering Sky*, Paul Bowles

Each of these books charts the experiences of people in foreign countries who are on journeys to escape from or discover something. All are set in Muslim countries, one of them describing Rory Stewart's walking trip through Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban.

Note: Students must read the books listed on their proposal; you may, if you learn of new and more relevant titles, revise but *please check with me first*.

Figure 1.1

Summary: At this time, I do not know a whole lot about what I am deciding to read. That is what I think is going to make my whole experience better and more intriguing. I will be able to read these stories and learn about so much from different places of the world, and therefore become a more knowledgeable person about these different places.

Prediction: Reading these three stories will open my eyes to how bad different places can really be. I will see how horrible humans can be to other humans and learn to be more grateful of the place that I live. I also know that these stories will make me sad and wish I could do something to save innocent people's humanity.

Titles and Authors:

- 1) *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*, Alphonsion Deng
- 2) *To Destroy You Is No Loss*, Joan D. Criddle
- 3) *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez

Importance: It is important for people to be aware of what is going on in different parts of the world, especially when innocent people are being murdered and dehumanized. It helps us become familiar with a world and other cultures that we do not know. Such knowledge will help us in the future by allowing us to learn from previous horrific mistakes. Also, people need to understand that not all places are as peaceful and wonderful as the United States of America.

Other Possible Sources: To further aid my study of this topic, I can listen to world news reports, look for newspaper articles, talk to people who help places with genocide and evil dictatorships, and look up websites about the genocides and different dictatorships and the effects of the innocent human beings.

Students had the semester to complete the assignment, reading one book every six weeks in addition to the required texts we were reading and essays they were writing. At the end of the first two grading periods (every six weeks), students write an in-class essay on the book they read for their project, basing the essay on how the book relates to their final topic. They use the Thesis Generator (Figure 1.2) and their original guiding question for their project to develop their own topic. An example of one such in-class essay follows; this one was written by Chris Schmidt as an investigation of war and its effects on those who fight. Figure 1.3 shows the AP Essay Scoring Rubric that was used for the same project.



A full-size version of each of these handouts, customizable and reproducible, is available at www.heinemann.com.

Thesis Generator

Topic: Compare and contrast the different types of relationships humans have with nature. Include examples from your own experience and the different texts we have read or viewed. After comparing and contrasting, make a claim about

what you feel are our rights and responsibilities toward the natural world in general. Provide reasons and evidence to support your claim.

Example

1. Identify the <i>subject</i> of your paper.	Relationships between teenagers and their parents
2. Turn your subject into a guiding question.	How does the relationship between teenagers and their parents change?
3. Answer your question with a statement.	As teens grow more independent, they resent and resist the limitations and expectations their parents impose on them.
4. Refine this statement into a <i>working</i> thesis.	Conflict between teenagers and their parents is a difficult but necessary stage in kids' development.

1. Identify the <i>subject</i> of your paper.	
2. Turn your subject into a guiding question.	
3. Answer your question with a statement.	
4. Refine this statement into a <i>working</i> thesis.	

May be photocopied for classroom use. © 2010 by Jim Burke from *What's the Big Idea?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Figure 1.2

AP Essay Scoring Rubric

Student: _____

Paper: _____

Score: _____

Score	Description
9–8 A+/A	<input type="checkbox"/> responds to the prompt clearly, directly, and fully <input type="checkbox"/> approaches the text analytically <input type="checkbox"/> supports a coherent thesis with evidence from the text <input type="checkbox"/> explains how the evidence illustrates and reinforces its thesis <input type="checkbox"/> employs subtlety in its use of the text and the writer's style is fluent and flexible <input type="checkbox"/> has no mechanical and grammatical errors
7–6 A–/B+	<input type="checkbox"/> responds to the assignment clearly and directly but with less development than an 8–9 paper <input type="checkbox"/> demonstrates a good understanding of the text <input type="checkbox"/> supports its thesis with appropriate textual evidence <input type="checkbox"/> analyzes key ideas but lacks the precision of an 8–9 essay <input type="checkbox"/> uses the text to illustrate and support in ways that are competent but not subtle <input type="checkbox"/> written in a way that is forceful and clear with few grammatical and mechanical errors
5 B	<input type="checkbox"/> addresses the assigned topic intelligently but does not answer it fully and specifically <input type="checkbox"/> shows a good but general grasp of the text <input type="checkbox"/> uses the text to frame an apt response to the prompt <input type="checkbox"/> employs textual evidence sparingly or offers evidence without attaching it to the thesis <input type="checkbox"/> written in a way that is clear and organized but may be somewhat mechanical <input type="checkbox"/> marred by conspicuous grammatical and mechanical errors
4–3 B–/C	<input type="checkbox"/> fails in some important way to fulfill the demands of the prompt <input type="checkbox"/> does not address part of the assignment <input type="checkbox"/> provides no real textual support for its thesis <input type="checkbox"/> bases its analysis on a misreading of some part of the text <input type="checkbox"/> presents one or more incisive insights among others of less value <input type="checkbox"/> written in a way that is uneven in development with lapses in organization and clarity <input type="checkbox"/> undermined by serious and prevalent errors in grammar and mechanics
2–1 D/F	<input type="checkbox"/> combines two or more serious failures: <input type="checkbox"/> does not address the actual assignment <input type="checkbox"/> indicates a serious misreading of the text (or suggest the student did <i>not</i> read it) <input type="checkbox"/> does not offer textual evidence <input type="checkbox"/> uses textual evidence in a way that suggests a failure to understand the text <input type="checkbox"/> is unclear, badly written, or unacceptably brief <input type="checkbox"/> is marked by egregious errors <input type="checkbox"/> is written with great style but devoid of content (rare but possible)

Comments

Figure 1.3

The most primal need of humans is our desire to have companionship. In *Tree of Smoke*, Denis Johnson intertwines the need for companionship with survival. As the various characters progress in their journeys, they are constantly working to make connections with others. But when war becomes involved in those relationships, complications arise. The absence of human contact, or the loss of it, has serious mental implications. The Vietnam War produced previously unheard of numbers of veterans who returned home with mental illnesses. Because of this new type of war, where casualties skyrocketed, and support on the home-front disintegrated, countless men were returned to their families less than whole.

Early on in the novel, the relationship between Skip Bonds and Kathy Jones is a perfect example of a person's need to connect with another. Skip is a man following orders from unknown men in a land that he is trying to escape. After the news of her husband's death, Kathy is lost, without foundation, somewhere in the Philippines. Both of these foreigners are disillusioned by the Philippine culture which represents a vast difference from the western culture they were raised in. In each other they find that something that is familiar, that they can rely on for support.

On the other hand, James Houston, a high school student in Arizona, is being held down by meaningless relationships that are hurting his development as a man. He pities his mother in her struggle to make a living working on a ranch, and he is unable to find substance in his relationships with his peers. His time with Stevie is simply his way of fulfilling his primitive instinct to "get laid." Once she lets him go all the way, and his goal is achieved, he realizes that he still needs a deeper connection. So he flees the environment where he has no room to grow and he enlists in the Army. Even as he is finishing his basic training, James starts to fear the death that awaits him in Vietnam.

As Skip continues his journey to find something fulfilling, he is presented with an unusual circumstance around the death of Father Carri-gan. He feels that he is being led in circles, sent by his uncle to learn of this man, he feels deceived when his uncle's henchmen arrive to kill the man he was sent to see.

As the story progresses toward the war in Vietnam, the characters' relationships become tense and begin to deteriorate away from them. They are being thrown toward a probable death by their own country, and worst of all, their own families are protesting against the work they are trying to do. Lost in a world where simple actions must be judged on

their personal, skewed conscience, the men become overwhelmed by their surroundings.

Because of the absence of connections to people they need to rely on, and surrounded by the deaths of their compatriots, friends, and allies, their minds become warped by all of the various problems they are faced with. As a result of these issues, the men are mentally unstable and become [some] of the many veterans who returned from this new war, less than men.

Extensions of Inquiry

The semester final, however, can't be an essay as I have no way to grade all those papers the week they graduate (especially since our grades for seniors are due a week before graduation). Besides, getting them to write essays would make Sisyphus' task look like a stroll through the garden. In addition to the work required (as outlined previously), I asked each student to turn in material on the day of the final, based on the handout shown in Figure 1.4, and give a *brief* presentation.

The night before her final, Claire sent an urgent email asking for last-minute help. Does it bother me that she “wants a good grade”? Not at all, because I am just thrilled to see a senior engaged and committed, working hard to meet my (and her own) high standards. Here is her email:

Hello Mr. Burke,

So I'm putting together my final for tomorrow, and I'm having trouble figuring out the best way to articulate what I want to say.

What I ended up doing was collecting personal note cards from people I knew, neighbors, strangers and such about their relationships with children or parents then putting them into a notebook (PostSecret.com inspired, many are anonymous, some are signed). I'm attempting to get these on to a PowerPoint, but I'm not sure how that will fare just yet.

Many are very interesting to say the least and I love what I have gotten done so far . . . just not sure where I should go from here. Ultimately, I want a good grade to be honest.

Claire Hickey



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AP Follow-up to Inquiry: Final Exam

Overview

This semester you have read three books, each one exploring a theme or subject common to the others. The premise was to examine a subject from different perspectives. Now it's time to wrap it all up and think about what you read, then share that learning with the rest of us in a way we will find interesting and you will find challenging.

Invitation

This may well be the last piece of thinking you do in high school, so I want something not just good, or even great, but something intriguing and remarkable. So, the first step is to find a way to connect all three books that draws on your individual intellectual strengths—your creative talents. Thus, you must find some idea common to all three books aside from, for example, that they all have to do with love of or living in a foreign country. Then represent that idea in one of the following ways (or some other way you come up with):

- Metaphor
- Symbol
- Equation
- Thought problem
- Diagram (or other visual explanation)
- Poem
- Artwork (or other visual representation, including photograph)
- Video (must be short!)
- Musical interpretation
- Dramatic interpretation
- Surprise me!

This first part is not meant to be some massive project in itself, though it is meant to challenge you to show us both what you can do at your best in your area of greatest talent.

You must also write a paragraph that explains the meaning and purpose behind your product in this first step. If, for example, you created a visual metaphor (e.g., a drawing of a seed that opens up into a blossom to visually represent the effect of love on people), you would then write a paragraph explaining your idea and the visual metaphor.

Paper

In addition to the opportunity just outlined, you will write a *one-page typed paper* that discusses the three books you read and what you learned from them about the subject you explored. **List the three books and their authors at the top of your paper, please.** Guiding questions might include:

- What was my subject and why did I want to explore it?
- What did these authors say about this subject?
- What interesting similarities and differences did I notice?
- How do these authors' ideas about this subject compare with my own?
- What did I realize, or learn, that surprised me most about this subject after exploring it for a semester?

Here is what Claire turned in the day of her final:

Claire Hickey
May 19, 2008
English Burke AP, Second Semester

Inquiry Project Topic: Parent-Child Relationships

I chose this topic because it is one which affects us all, as mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, grandparents or grandchildren. My own relationship with my parents over the past few years, and the effect the loss of my uncle has had on my grandparents, were all reasons I chose this topic. The note cards were a great addition to the topic, due to the fact that it allowed an even larger number of responses, rather than just relying on the literature and my own personal experiences.

The conclusions I found are difficult to articulate, and more of an understanding than anything else:

- The degree to which we care for another, and are willing to put our own selves out for another, particularly our own children, illustrates an interesting complex of the human condition. While we typically display an almost savage, natural side, as can be seen in McCarthy's *The Road* and books such as Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the way we treat our offspring shows off a totally different side of ourselves.
- Father and mother figures are imperative in a child's life, whether in forming a child's morals, guiding them or simply being a physical comfort. However, these figures aren't necessarily biological, and occasionally biological parents can be harmful to a child.
- Parent-child relationships are complex in the nature that every choice, every decision and every conversation can turn the relationship, and have both positive and negative effects. Timing is also key, and learning to accept your son/daughter/mother/father for who they are, and not who you believe they are supposed to be.
- As parents and children, we will never completely understand each other, and if we can accept that, we will build a strong bond.

Coetzee, J. M. *Disgrace*. New York: Penguin. 2000. (220 pages)

Disgrace took me to another degree of a father and daughter relationship, focusing on a father who ultimately ruins his career when he has an affair with a young student in his class. Moving in with his daughter on her farm in South Africa, he attempts to change her, or even in a

sense, mold her, to be what he believes she should be. She sticks to her own ideals and in turn this confuses him. After an incident in which they were both attacked and Lucy raped, he struggles with his position as her father, struggling to define what the word “father” itself should mean. In the end, the experience betters David, who finally learns that his daughter is an individual and has chosen the right path, while he realizes he may not have.

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003. (371 pages)

A novel which everyone apparently read except me until now, I found it interesting to say the least. A great story, one that truly stands out. I attempted to focus on Sohrab's relationship with Amir in the United States, his own loss of a mother and father and ultimately Amir's desire to please his father, Baba, as a child. Overall, this novel shows the core of human nature and the necessity we feel to care for and be cared for by another. The influence our parents have on us as children and we have on them as parents is quite grand, and as cliché as it sounds, we never realize how important it is until it's gone.

Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York: Penguin Books. 2003. (302 pages)

This novel not only explores the relationship between Lily Owens and how she deals with her mother's death, but also the relationship between Lily and her African American “mothers.” I found this book fascinating because it presented a unique situation which was a strong addition to my study of this subject. Her relationship with her father, and his eventual realization that it would be best to let her go in the end, was another component which I enjoyed. Most important was the idea that mothers and fathers aren't always biological, and those which are biological might not be the best figures in our lives.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Toronto: Random House. 2006. (287 pages)

At the end the end of the world, or so it seems, a father and son attempt to survive among dust and a barren landscape full of cannibals. The horror that they face every day, the extremities they go to, are unbelievable. The father's perseverance to get his son to safety, despite his own inevitable death, truly show the effort a parent will go to in order to give their child a better life. Interesting ideas came up throughout the story, such as possibly having to kill his son, and the way cannibals treated each other.



Figure 1.5 Claire presents her senior project on family relationships to the class at the end of the year.



Figure 1.6 Samples of Claire's project

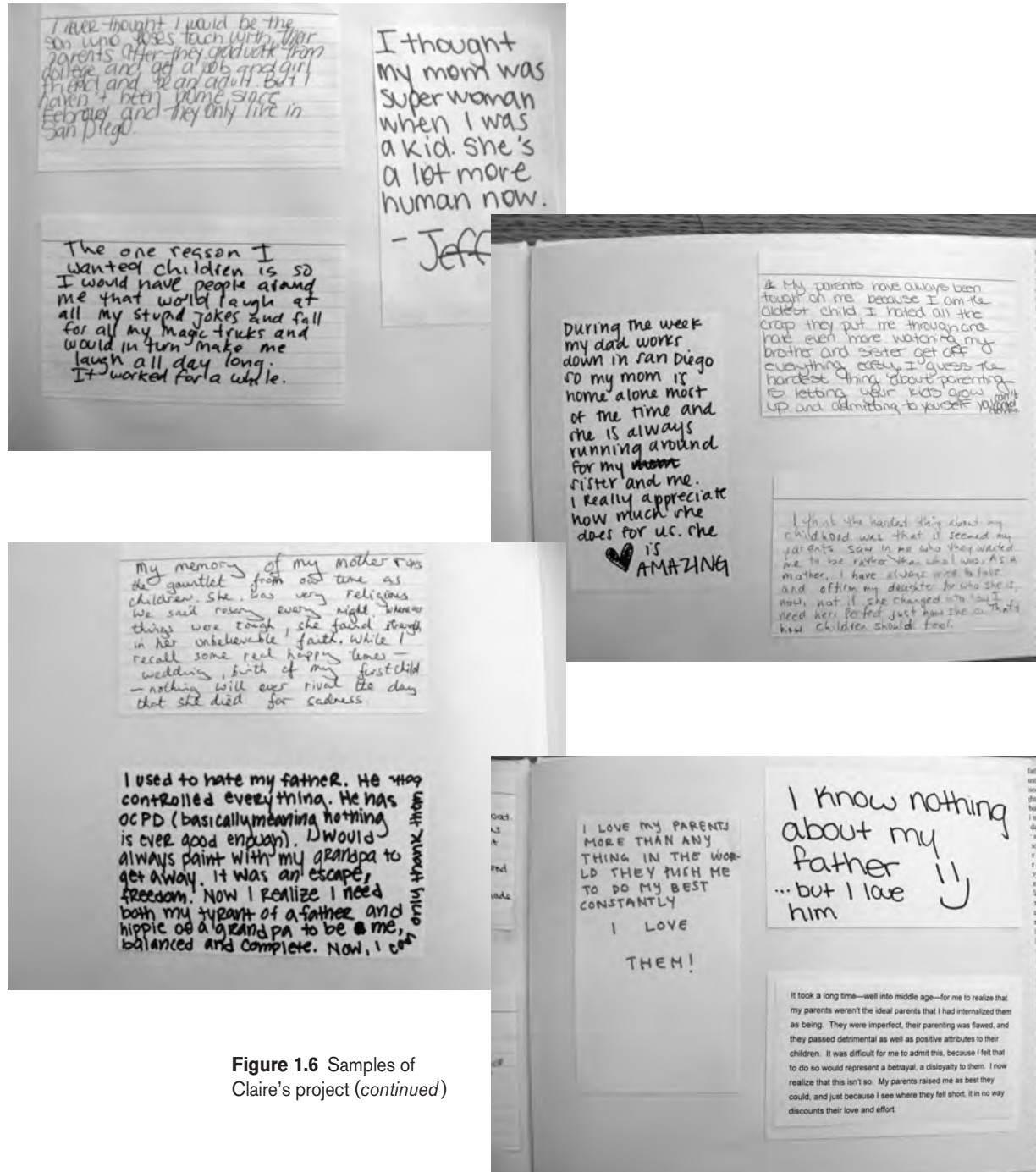


Figure 1.6 Samples of Claire's project (continued)

Claire offers an engaging yet somewhat traditional print-based final project, but most worked to produce more media-based final productions, reinforcing the extent to which many of today's graduates are fluent in and engaged by literacies we are still struggling to incorporate into our curriculum. As I mentioned earlier, Chris Schmidt investigated war and its effects on soldiers, and collaborated with several other boys who explored related questions, such as the "darkness in the human heart," and whether there is such a thing as a just war. They decided to work together because they shared not only a common subject but also a mutual interest in filmmaking. Ultimately, the boys collaborated to create an engaging fifteen-minute original film for which they also wrote the script.

As with Claire, they had to do more than just press the Play button and stand back. They had to situate their film in the context of their inquiries, explaining how it related to the questions they were trying to answer. Their film was a serious effort, an engaging stop-action movie that involved multiple cameras, careful editing in iMovie, and a dynamic soundtrack filled with well-chosen songs from the Vietnam era.

Here is Chris Schmidt's write-up, which they all had to turn in the day of the final:

Christopher Schmidt
English Lit & Comp

The Consequences of War

Mankind has always engaged in war; it has become an accepted part of life. Perhaps in the past it was simply ignored, but as warfare has evolved, a new form of casualty has emerged. Countless numbers of soldiers have returned from recent wars with more than mere physical wounds; they have returned psychologically damaged. This side-effect of war is something that the military has attempted to ignore. After Vietnam, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs refused to acknowledge the mental problems of many Americans returning from overseas, and as a result they were refused much-needed medical care. Through the reading of the following books, I intended to research the source of these mental problems and how they were dealt with in postwar environments.



Figure 1.7 Raymond, Owen, and Chris presenting

Conclusions

- A major element in the development of these mental illnesses is the loss of human contact. It is clear early on in *Tree of Smoke* that individuals do not function well in the absence of human interaction.
- The debate and anger that was building up in the homeland created a hostile and charged environment for the veterans to return to. A major reason why the Veterans Administration was so adamant about denying mental issues was because they had become so defensive as a result of a hostile counterculture.
- The mental issues of war are by no means new. As shown in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, a story about early 20th-century warfare, few can survive war without suffering some physical or mental harm. A major reason why these issues became so prominent after Vietnam is that by that time we actually had treatments for these problems.

Johnson, Denis. *Tree of Smoke*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2007. 614.

This novel portrays several characters in their journey to and through Vietnam. As a whole, the characters feel a constant need to find companionship in such an isolating setting. With few others to connect to, the characters start losing touch with reality. James Houston becomes distraught with his situation in America; he feels out of touch with the people he knows, and turns to the army for escape. Unfortunately, as he completes training, he realizes that the army is not the best escape option as it is leading him to an almost certain death. The suffering portrayed by the characters in this novel results in the mental illnesses that have become the center of my research.

Hemingway, Ernest. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. New York: Scribner. 1940. 471.

Hemingway offers a detailed description of a young man brought to fight in the Spanish Civil War in the early 20th century. Robert Jordan, the main character, is an American brought in to aid a side that he is told to fight for. As he progresses into the war, he realizes that he is not killing big bad Fascists, but is, in fact, killing men who have been brought on in the name of Fascism to fight for this idea they do not even understand. He becomes challenged by this idea and begins to lose his sense of control. This simple moment of understanding disables him and begins to cause him great mental anguish. This occurrence is an example of mental suffering experienced in an older form of warfare. While the more recognized forms of mental health resulting from war came out of Vietnam, there were certainly issues occurring in war well before that.

Maraniss, David. *They Marched Into Sunlight*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2003. 592.

This nonfiction book revolves around two settings, one being a battle in Vietnam, the other a protest in Madison, Wisconsin. The two settings illustrate the contrast between a soldier's point of view, and the point of view of someone on the home front. This book describes the environment that eventually became a burden for soldiers returning home from Vietnam. While the protesters were a necessary part in ending the war, their actions created a hostile environment that was far from beneficial for soldiers returning psychologically unstable.

This semester-long investigation of these subjects amounts to a personal quest, an intellectual rite of passage for these students. It is time for them to take

the reins of their own education for the moment, showing themselves and me not only what they have learned but also that they want to learn, that they have subjects they are hungry to know more about as they prepare to leave my class and our high school for the larger arena of work and college. All the work Chris, or Claire, or any of the others did over the semester is its own reward; and as they arrive at the final, they are clearly eager to share it, to challenge themselves one last time on the final before packing up and graduating.

They do not arrive at this final day unprepared, nor having been left to their own devices. Seniors are already rudderless enough! Moreover, students who are guided by questions need help learning how to steer their way through such uncharted waters. Without guidance and accountability, students can wander from the topic they are investigating, arriving at the final with little more than a summary or an extended digression. To keep my seniors on course, I meet with them regularly in the weeks prior to the days of final presentations, taking advantage of the many interruptions (Senior Day, AP exams, graduation orientations—common during this time of the senior year) to arrange such individual conferences. I don't need to meet with each student long, some not at all if they show clear evidence of being on track. Usually I sit on the side with individual students to pose a few routine questions about problems they are encountering, resources that might help, solutions they could consider, what percentage of their project is done, and how they plan to present it to the class. (See Figure 1.8.)

Prior to these meetings, I ask students to write down the question they are investigating on an index card, what they plan to do for their final, how long they



Figure 1.8 My conference with senior Hannah Pham

would like in class, and what their needs will be when they present. I need to know the length of the presentation so that I can schedule the five days we will take for all the finals, the fifth day being the two-hour final period itself.

While it is important to get the logistics worked out during these conferences, it is much more important that we discuss their actual final production because it should reflect a deep understanding of their subject and what they are able to do when it comes to communicating by one means or another, one medium or another. Thus, my primary role at this point is to pose questions, such as the following, while consulting the index card they filled out:

- What is your subject?
- What is the question you were trying to answer about that subject?
- What is the point you want to convey to us about this subject?
- What are some of the key ideas that emerged from your investigation of this question?
- How will you convey these insights and ideas you learned while investigating this question?
- Why is that (e.g., a video, painting, series of poems, monologue) the best way to convey the insights into your subject?
- What you are saying is good, but it sounds like you might end up with a visual summary of the books if you do that. How will you avoid such a limited response to the big question you are asking?

As the finals begin, it is evident that this careful planning and guidance paid off, since students offer, from the very first one, remarkable presentations that give us all plenty to think about. Each one is different, but all share the same quality.

As Brittany Martinez steps up to begin the finals in the first period, she brings with her adult twins, two men with whom her father works, both of whom were adopted and raised by different families. Thus begins her presentation, part of which includes a discussion with the twins about how our environment and experiences shape us. Throughout her twenty-minute presentation, which everyone is clearly interested in, she poses excellent questions to the twins, and connects their comments and her own findings to the literature she read during the semester.

Once the applause dies down, Matt G. gets up and writes a big mathematical equation he created on the board then turns and asks, “How can we measure and



Figure 1.9 Hanayo read three apocalyptic novels—*The Road*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Pesthouse*—that she represented in her original painting; it shows a source of light streaming down on a lone person in the midst of all the ruins.



Figure 1.10 Trevor and his multimedia Africa presentation

maximize human potential?" And so our finals go. (Figures 1.9 and 1.10 show two other students making their presentations.) All of the seniors have asked questions they want to understand but realize they will need their whole lives to answer.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING: SUMMER READING AND THE START OF THE SCHOOLYEAR

Before students even enter my senior class in August, they know they'll be required to think, to ask questions, to make connections. This unit began with the end of the year. It only makes sense, then, to end with how the year began: their summer reading requirement prior to beginning the year with me. Instead of just choosing a couple classics or contemporary AP-level books and telling students to read and take notes on them, I want my students to have a conversation with themselves and the books about a subject that matters to them. I know that most of my kids will not study literature in college; yet they have emerging and serious interests, areas of strength such as science, psychology, economics, politics, and war (given the era in which they live). Thus my summer reading assignment, shown in Figure 1.11, offers them pairs of books they can choose, depending on their area of interest.



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AP Literature Summer Reading

Mr. Burke

Overview

Incoming AP Literature students are required to read several books over the summer in preparation for the course and subsequent AP exam. One portion of the AP exam, the Free Response essay, demands that students have a wide range of challenging literary works on which they can draw when writing that essay. The goal of this summer's reading, however, is not to prepare you for the exam but to initiate you into the conversation about ideas through books by both contemporary and classic authors.

AP Literature *is* college; it not a preparation for college. If you are looking for ways around this reading assignment, you should not enroll in this class.

Students who do not complete the summer reading—all of it, as spelled out by these guidelines—will not be eligible to take the course.

If you have any questions, write to me at jburke@englishcompanion.com.

Requirements

Each student must do the following:

- Choose one pair of books from the following list of books.
- Read the chosen books, taking notes or annotating as needed to help you do well on the in-class essay on these books. These notes are for you: I will not collect or evaluate them.
- Purchase, read, and annotate *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* by Thomas C. Foster. (Note: There are *many* used copies of this book on Amazon.com for only a couple dollars.)
- Write an in-class essay on the books in which you use the ideas from Foster's book as a guide to analyze the literature you read.

Titles

The following pairs of books comprise a conversation that should take place between you, the authors, and their characters. The books share a common idea that should be clear enough by the time you finish reading them. While there is no required order, you might consider reading Foster's book first as a way of preparing to read the two novels.

1. *Beowulf* (Seamus Heaney translation)
Going After Cacciato, Tim O'Brien
2. *Caramelo*, Sandra Cisneros
The Waves, Virginia Woolf
3. *The Book Thief* (by Marcus Zusak)
Obasan, Joy Kagawa
4. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid
The Fall, Albert Camus

When it comes to developing independence and a love of reading, we want to provide as many opportunities as possible to help students, even AP Lit seniors, to get into “the reading zone,” which Nancie Atwell (2007) describes as “more of a zone than a state . . . a place where readers went when they left our classroom behind and lived vicariously in their books” (21). Even more than the “zone,” I want students, these rambunctious seniors about to graduate, to enter into other selves, other realities, trying them on en route to the person they will eventually become.

So begins a year we spend asking and investigating questions that help students with those bigger, more personal questions about who they are, what they should be, why they are here. We spend the year with *Antigone* and *Hamlet*, *Raskolnikov* and *Marlow*, *Sophocles* and *Conrad*, *Faulkner* and *Hesse*, who, like *Hamlet* himself, wonders what he should be, how he should live. As the questions in Figure 1.12 suggest, when given the opportunity to ask themselves, “To be _____ or not to be _____?”, our students have a lot to say, so much they want to ask, and even more they still want to know.

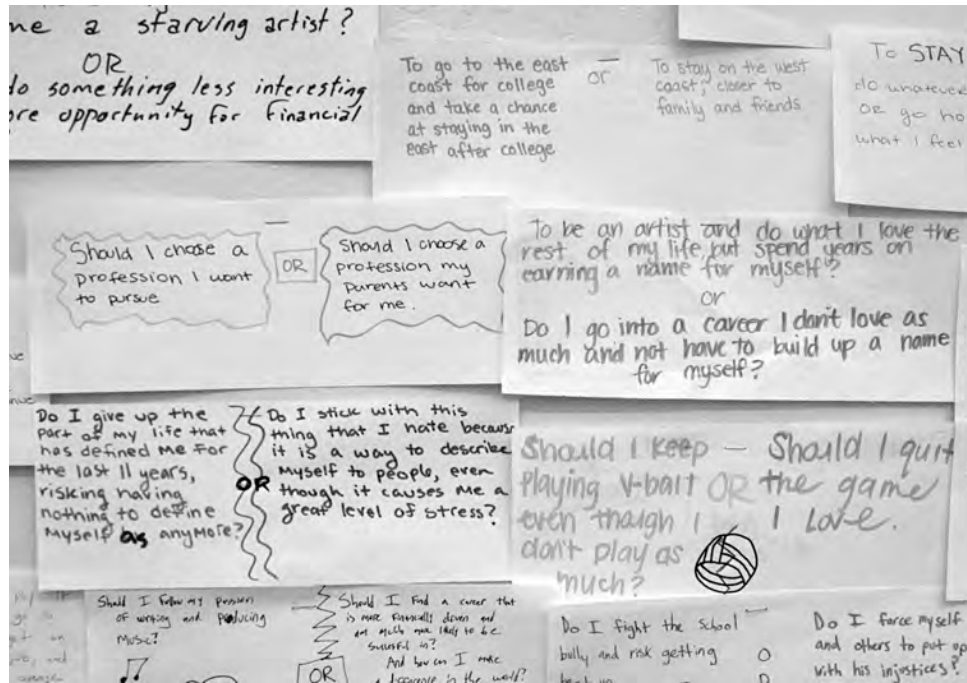


Figure 1.12 Hamlet questions on the classroom wall

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