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# Read Like A Writer: Consume, Consider, Create



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**K**elly slumps, her feet slide under the desk in front of her. Outside, a 90-degree day begs her to swim at a friend’s pool or lick frozen custard at the local shop. Because she failed English 9, she is in summer school. Nine of us share this room, Monday through Thursday, for six weeks.

I know the students don’t want to be there—they tell me as much. But this summer, by earning an English credit, they remain on track to graduate and can enroll in English 10 in the fall.

As a journalism major and writing teacher (creative writing, journalism, composition), the summer school assignment disrupts my decade of familiarity. To calm my unease, I remember what Frank Smith (1988) in *Joining the Literacy Club* suggested: that students learn by joining with others in stimulating activities they enjoy—that learning is a social endeavor. I welcome students to the curriculum, to developing the skills necessary for expression, interpretation and communication. I say, “We will be a book club, enjoying novels and analyzing characters and sharing our stories. We

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will practice reading like writers. And you will write your own pieces to add to the canon of literature.”

## Consume

Throughout English 9, students consume a variety of texts, consider their meanings and implications and create their own pieces. I contemplate how to engage reluctant learners and make their study a success. I focus on these specific students, their attitudes, their approaches. What will produce success the second time around?

I aim to nurture lifelong readers and writers, people who want to create and share—and who find joy in words. Students who enjoy reading and writing are more likely to return to the literary arts. I want my students to not only gain confidence, but also develop an affinity for language, for expression, for art. Because enjoyment leads to practice, it should also lead to progress, learning, and growth. I invite my students to join the community of readers and writers (professionals, hobbyists, artists). I tell them summer school won't be too bad—they might even enjoy it—if they approach it with a positive attitude and open mind.

We start by reading *House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1989) together, aloud. We take turns debating the author's intent. I point out theme, tone, characters, plot. Students discuss why Sandra Cisneros chose vignette form. I know they must recognize literary quality and devices before they can create and use their own. As Robin Griffith, Ph.D., (assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at East Carolina University) wrote, “...in order for young writers to begin employing the writer's craft in independent writing samples, they must first be made aware of well-crafted writing. They must hear the sound of good writing and develop an ear for recognizing it and an eye for noticing it in print.” (Griffith, 2010, p. 56). Although all students don't agree *House on Mango Street* is “good writing,” they make connections between characters in the novel and other characters in coming of age novels, films, YouTube stars. They identify and share their own definition of “good writing.” They also hear one English teacher's

argument for and analysis of Cisneros's skill, voice and value.

## Consider

Students highlight favorite chapters; they share where they're bored and what they think. They make connections to the text. Strickland, Ganske and Monroe (2002) contend that “thinking and talking about books promotes children's critical understanding of what they read” so I probe to find something—even one sentence—that resonates. After our discussions, I ask students to read like a writer: “Why do you think Cisneros used a metaphor here?”—“What does her repetition do for you?”—“How did she develop characters?” Even if students didn't come to summer school with the language to identify or understand these concepts, our discussion puts each stylistic device in context. It creates a framework to understand the impact a metaphor or simile, for example, might have on a reader.

Reading like a writer encourages students to feel the power of voice, to gain confidence and to understand an author's craft. I want students to not only understand concepts, but also to identify and ultimately use them. Strickland, Ganske, and Monroe (2002) suggested that “critical thinking and the ability to personalize meanings to individual experiences and apply what is read or written in the real world, under many different circumstances, and with many types of texts, may now be termed the ‘new basics’” (p. 2). In developing these basics, I invite students to participate in the book and to think of the author as a person with an intent. I refer back to the chapter titled “Hairs”. In this vignette, Cisneros (1989) reveals information about the narrator's family, especially her mother, through a one physical trait: hair. Her first paragraph describes the hair of the narrator's father and the hair of her siblings, using descriptions to give the reader insight into their personalities. Cisneros also reveals the narrator's feelings about her mother in the passage, using stylistic devices.

I ask students to think about the people in their life, the characteristics they share with them—and those that make them distinctive, different. Katie Wood Ray (1999) wrote “that my students wrote

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about topics that really mattered to them was more important to me than anything else” (p. 8). I know this to be true. In my experience, students write best when the topic is intimate. I ask students to choose a trait to write about. I say, It can be a trait you share with family or friends or coworkers or teammates or one that makes you stand out. I encourage and challenge them choose a topic that is genuinely important to them. I want my students, like Cisneros did, to invest in their topic and to choose one that matters.

## **Create**

In composing a vignette, some students write about personal style; others an ability (cooking, athletic); others a trait (sense of humor or impatience). Griffith (2010) wrote that “helping students learn to read like writers was the first step in helping them learn to write like writers” (p. 58). And although I follow this recommendation, my students struggle through the process. They work over a series of days, bringing ideas, phrases and working rough drafts to me, parents, classmates. Students attempt to write like Cisneros (1989) did with metaphors, similes, personification, alliteration, repetition and sensory details. But this is art—messy, and anything but neat and seamless. They learn writing is a process and that there is always room to improve, always words to edit and sentences to tweak. They draft, start over, edit and polish. The results?

### **Hair**

by Natalie Frey (2017):

*Fifteen minutes. I need fifteen minutes to prepare my hair for its daily excursions through the halls of the high school. I need fifteen minutes to clamp the flat iron onto each strand. I need fifteen minutes to create an appearance I am comfortable sharing with the world.*

*My hair: a thick sheet of silk atop my head forcing each and every follicle into a desirable shape. Each hair screams as the products burn off into a wisp of smoke in the air.*

*But—he takes twenty minutes. Twenty minutes to prepare. Fingers intertwined in locks of jet black, as the suds pour down*

*like clouds falling from the sky. He embraces his scalp in clean, dry towels shaping the final product with an aerosol can and an electric hair dryer. Dry heat caresses his scalp like the sun to the trees in late July.*

*Twenty minutes. Twenty minutes of each day, in hopes of an outcome that will create confidence; an outcome that should have been there the whole time. Twenty minutes to fix what was not broken in the first place.*

*Before he steps out the door to go to school, he spends two more minutes making sure that each strand is in the desired shape. Twenty-two minutes.*

### **Hands**

by Malloreay Wallace (2017)

*Mama, Papa, Brother and I have hands of the same flesh and different stories.*

*Papa’s hands are two leather gloves, sun-bleached and calloused. The grooves in his hands are like the cracks in our old oak table—the one Mama will serve dinner on. Papa’s hands are like an August sunset, warm and comfortable.*

*Mama’s hands are two balloons, ruddy and as plump as cherries. Mama’s hands look like plastic and hit like iron. Mama’s hands are like nostalgia, bittersweet and confused.*

*And Brother, well, his hands are razor blades, sharp and quick. Scabbed knuckles, thick from fighting, his hands are two strong shovels building castles out of nothing. Brother’s hands are like eggs, fragile but hard.*

*My hands...my hands are tangled laces, young and messy. Moving with uncertainty, they’re freshly born dancers, stumbling through life. My hands are like strings of grass, wispy and weak.*

*Mama, Papa, Brother and I have hands of different stories and the same flesh.*

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## Share

Students share pieces and we talk about being writers, about using exemplars and model texts as inspiration. Students discuss challenges and where they can and want to improve.

Next, we look at Cisneros' (1989) chapter, "Four Skinny Trees". The writing exercise that follows is unlike anything, the students tell me, they've done before. Throughout this exercise, students keep Cisneros' structure, but use their own voice.

Students start with the chapter title, "Four Skinny Trees". Cisneros (1989) uses a number, an adjective and a plural noun. Students do the same, writing a number, followed by an adjective and a plural noun. Students move through the vignette, word by word, sentence by sentence, keeping her structure but telling their own story. I witness Griffith's (2010) theory come to life as my students discover creativity through this approach. As Griffith explains, this technique implores a "release of responsibility model" (p. 57) and "deliberately planned activities that [draws] students' attention to well-crafted writing" (p. 49) and encourages students to mimic it.

One of my students, Charles, said, "I have a love-hate with this style...it pushes you to work harder with what you are writing. On the other hand, when you are on a roll and you want to say something, too bad." His classmate Lauren said, "I was surprised that I got all of this done after today. I thought it would be a lot harder than it was to copy the structure. It's definitely an interesting way to get out of a writer's block."

## Add To The Canon

Students submit pieces to writers' markets, including Teen Ink. Nate Ferro, Natalie Frey, Megan Rutkowski and Malloreay Wallace all had their pieces published.

### *10 Dirty Toes*

by Megan Rutkowski (2015)

*They are the ones who leave prints in the house. I am the one who defends them. Ten dirty toes, long digits and painted clothes like others. Ten who belong in shoes but are not. Ten rank excuses that help me balance.*

*From my view, I can smell them, but Cleo licks them and doesn't mind the color.*

*Their pink is secret. They send giant arms into the dirt. They kick up and they mash down and grab the sap between their hard calluses and pinch the ants with vigorous tendons and never quit their march. This is how they walk.*

*Let one forget to lift up, they'd all crumple like rocks off a cliff, each with their nails in the other. Throbbing, throbbing, throbbing they feel when I run. They harden.*

*When I am too tired and too sore to keep moving, when I am an old woman from many years, then I will look at my toes. When there is nowhere left to go. Ten who hardened despite shoes. Ten who throbbed and do not forget to lift. Ten whose only reason is to keep me up and not fall.*

### *Three Broken Pencils*

by Nate Ferro (2017)

*They are the only obstruction in my path. Consequently, I am the only one with no intention to dispose of them. Three pencils, all mechanical, short of lead like I am short of ideas. Three that were found on the floor in different hallways. Three practically nonexistent eraser-less. From my backpack, I hear the 0.7 mm graphite slivers rattle around their inner barrels.*

*Their location is convoluted. They warrant a frantic search through all the leadless pencils. They are always burrowed deep within their designated pocket and require fragile extraction. Otherwise they'd find themselves back on the hallway floor.*

*Permit one to be used for an important exam, with a successful outcome, it is the lucky one. If misplaced, the second one will take over. A couple of poor quizzes, and it's labeled "cursed." That one gets purposely misplaced, and then the last one gets a turn.*

*When ideas for a narrative are absent, my excuse is "I can't write with a broken*

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*pencil.” When incentive and inspiration for storytelling makes its presence clear, I’ll pull out the cracked-tip BIC and make my hand cramp. A personal paradox of sorts. Three with stories withheld. Three with stories to tell. Three who found purpose after being tossed, or perhaps dropped, onto white floor tiles.*

## **Moving Forward**

By the end of our six weeks together, students realize what Katie Wood Ray (1999) suggests: “Good writers don’t pursue their craft with reckless abandon. Instead, they have come to realize that language is there to be used, in any manner possible, to make meaning” (p. 21). Reading like a writer gives students the lens, framework and language to analyze—and the inspiration to create their own stories. It also allows them to hone and practice their skills as artists, creators and authors.

On the last day of summer school, students and I venture to the library. They choose a novel to check out for the rest of the summer. As they leave for home, I hand each student a half-sheet of paper on which I’ve written a challenge: read your book, create your own exercise, write your own work.

## **Resources**

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## **About the Author**

*Elizabeth Jorgensen is a teacher and writer. Her memoir, Go, Gwen, Go, co-written with Nancy Jorgensen, is available from Meyer & Meyer Sport. Shorter works appear in Wisconsin English Journal, Azalea and Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. She has presented at NCTE, WSRA and for NCTA. Learn more at <https://lizjorgensen.weebly.com/>*