

To Kill a Mockingbird in the Classroom

Walking in Someone Else's Shoes

The NCTE High School Literature Series



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4 Examining Text Structure

Every English language arts class contains a diverse group of students, and whether the class is a basic level or a more advanced one, some students will be stronger writers than others. For this reason, reading and discussing literary works in class enables us to demystify the writing process for students, many of whom view writing as a dichotomous proposition: A person is either a skilled writer or not, period. Because this mindset does little to encourage developing writers, helping students view a text through the lens of close reading enables them to grasp the craft behind the work as a whole. Indeed, it is positively overwhelming to imagine that even the most renowned works of literature began as a writer's ideas transcribed into printed words on a page and, through the reader-text transaction, gain a life of their own as scenes and characters spring to life differently in the mind of every person who reads that text. Abstractions assume concrete form through the reading transaction, and the resulting verisimilitude creates a sort of virtual reality for readers. The writer's craft makes this transformation possible, and literature provides the proof we need to convince students that there is a practical, utilitarian purpose for learning about the effects a writer creates through word choice, punctuation, and literary devices.

On the first day of class, I ask the students to write me a letter, including any personal information they want to share as well as

discussing their perceived strengths and weaknesses in English class. Year after year, I find that the ones who view themselves as weak students include statements such as “I’ve never been any good in English” or “I have trouble with pronouns.” Similarly, even those who believe they are strong students focus on mechanical issues, such as “I’ve always been a good speller.” In every class, a few students will mention that they enjoy reading or that they like writing poems or stories, but overall, their comments reveal that they have distilled the rich array of the English language arts curriculum into grammar and mechanics, which should function as components of a balanced program rather than existing in isolation.

For this reason, teachers face the challenge of breaking down walls that students use to mentally segment the English language arts curriculum, mutually reinforcing strands meant to be woven together to form a complete tapestry, but that remain loose, disconnected threads in their minds. We want them to achieve proficiency and fluency as writers, both in terms of their own intellectual development and for the practical necessity of communicating their ideas through clear, coherent prose. Yet even at the senior high level, so many students remain developmental writers. How have students benefited from countless hours of instruction in the rudiments of grammar and mechanics if they do not transfer what they have learned to their writing? Probably we all agree that without the transfer, knowledge of isolated skills and rules is of little value.

Fortunately, carefully crafted literature provides an effective tool for helping our students forge these connections and heighten their awareness of how to use the writing tools they have at their disposal. Harry Noden describes this process in *Image Grammar* when he presents the metaphor of the writer as an artist, “painting

than his right; when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh. He couldn't have cared less, so long as he could pass and punt.

When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident. I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that. He said it began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out. (7)

This excerpt enables students to grasp Lee's unique narrative style quickly, recognizing that the story is one from childhood and told in retrospect by an adult narrator. My guiding the discussion of the opening chapter also allows me to direct the students' attention to descriptive passages vital in establishing the setting, especially important since the novel's sociohistorical context grounds aspects of characterization and propels the plot. We begin by examining the underlying craft in the following description of Maycomb:

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks in the square. Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three-o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum.

People moved slowly then. They ambled across the square, shuffled in and out of the stores around it, took their time about everything. A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County. But it was a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told it had nothing to fear but fear itself. (9-10)

of Maycomb's characters. Through sharing their perceptions about the importance of expanding one's realm of understanding and experience, the students are well on their way to achieving an awareness of the role that change and open-mindedness will play in the novel.

Examining the Rhetorical Effects of Literary Devices

Word Choice and Repetition

Excerpts from the Tom Robinson trial provide opportunities for examining ways in which Lee's use of repetition, coupled with careful, deliberate word choice, creates specific rhetorical effects. After we have read and discussed the chapters focusing on the trial (Chapters 17 through 21), I reproduce select passages on a sheet of paper so students can concentrate on them and analyze the effects the repetition creates. For example, the following quotation occurs in Chapter 17 toward the beginning of Tom Robinson's trial when Atticus is questioning Mr. Ewell:

“Mr. Ewell,” Atticus began, “folks were doing a lot of running that night. Let's see, you say you ran to the house, you ran to the window, you ran inside, you ran to Mayella, you ran for Mr. Tate. Did you, during all this running, run for a doctor?” (175)

The students work independently to compose responses to the following questions, which will serve as the basis of our whole-class discussion:

1. Why do you think the words *ran* and *running* are repeated so many times in such a short passage? Describe the effect this repetition creates.
2. What effect does the repetition of short, subject-verb-object (you-ran-X) sentences create?

GIBBONS: Everyone has offered some keen observations, so what effect do you think all these subject-verb-object sentences create?

MARK: Stringing all those short sentences together creates the drama of running back and forth and re-creates the fast-paced action of what happened.

EMILY: Yeah, and since it's almost impossible to run that much, Atticus is discrediting Mr. Ewell.

NICOLE: Also, this creates a vision of where Mr. Ewell supposedly was running. I mean, it's a repetitive list of unnecessary activity that helps the jury picture everything that was happening.

BRETT: Overall, I'd call the effect tiring—both for the jury and for Mr. Ewell—making someone aggravated or tired so they'll tell the truth.

JAMES: It's just like what real lawyers do in court. They try to make witnesses mess up when they're lying.

Later, I ask the students to re-read Atticus's closing argument to the jury, paying attention to the words he repeats and thinking about underlying reasons for the repetition.

I say guilt, gentlemen, because it was guilt that motivated her. She has committed no crime, she has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with. She is the victim of cruel poverty and ignorance, but I cannot pity her: she is white. She knew full well the enormity of her offense, but because her desires were stronger than the code she was breaking, she persisted in breaking it. She persisted, and her subsequent reaction is something that all of us have known at one time or another. She did something that every child has

ABBY: And if she had separated the information by creating two sentences, the drama of the words would be lost.

JACOB: Also, using a colon is different from writing two separate sentences because it puts more emphasis on what Atticus is saying and causes a slight pause, so it can really sink in with the people on the jury.

CHUCK: Using the colon there shows how even though Mayella might seem poor and ignorant, there is no excuse for how she's acting because she is white, and that automatically puts her at an advantage over Tom Robinson.

JESSIE: And because of that, it stresses the racism in the town. If the colon didn't serve to connect "She is white" to what Atticus had just said, his statement would sound stupid, like he was stating the obvious, because everyone can see that Mayella is white, but the racism is at the heart of everything that's happening.

Many times my efforts at teaching student writers about the importance of precision in word choice have been less than productive, with students' efforts at revision reflecting nothing more than an extended session with a thesaurus and little understanding of the subtle connotations that separate appropriate from inappropriate word choice. For this reason, reading selections of Lee's novel with an eye for dissecting the craft behind her prose helps make the intangible aspects of the craft of effective writing more concrete in students' minds, enabling them to transfer techniques to their own writing.

Example: Then if he's not dead you've got one, haven't you? (8)

Though most students write “the comma sets off a tag question,” one group explains it by writing “a comma comes right before a short question stuck onto the end of the sentence, almost like an afterthought,” revealing that even though they might not be able to recite the rule verbatim, they understand the comma's function, which is what matters.

Example: What Mr. Radley did might seem peculiar to us, but it did not seem peculiar to him. (49)

Some of the groups explain the comma's function by writing that it “separates the main clauses in a compound sentence,” whereas others state that the comma “is used with a conjunction to join two separate sentences.” Another group explains that the “comma and coordinating conjunction separate independent clauses.” Clearly, all of the students understand the rule governing usage, even though they may use different terminology in their explanations.

Once the groups finish analyzing the sentences I have given them—usually no more than five or ten—they apply what they have learned by agreeing on any school-appropriate topic that interests them and then writing some original sentences that illustrate specific comma rules. Todd, Mark, and Brittney play in a band together, so their sentences reflect their shared interest in music. For example, the sentences they wrote to illustrate compound structure and the use of tag questions follow:

The Norwegian band Gorgoroth enjoys success in Sweden, but they are banned in many other countries.

Choosing to Break the Rules

As teachers, we have all experienced situations when our students have brought us books they are reading to point out a “mistake,” a sentence they have found in a text whose structure breaks conventional rules. As experienced readers and writers, we know that authors sometimes choose to break rules to create specific effects, and having our students analyze the effects created when this happens provides a way of showing them why authors sometimes choose to go against conventional usage. To illustrate this practice, I ask students to read the following sentence and describe the effect the commas create.

I had long had my eye on that baton: it was at V. J. Elmore’s, it was bedecked with sequins and tinsel, it cost seventeen cents. (100)

The students shared their observations during our discussion:

SARA: Harper Lee was trying to make it sound like a little kid was talking, so she wrote it the way a kid would explain it.

JOSEPH: Yeah, she [the narrator, Scout] sounds excited because the commas create only a small pause between the sentences, making the pace quicker than it would have been with another mark of punctuation, like a period.

MISTY: Even though it seems like a run-on, the author is really emphasizing the baton by describing every little detail about it in a way that sounds like a little girl talking about something she really wants.

Having students examine structures that break the rules fosters growth in their own writing, for they begin broadening the range

work in large- or small-group format. For example, Julia chose the following selection from Chapter 2, when Scout begins the first grade, as one of her passages to analyze and imitate.

She discovered that I was literate and looked at me with more than faint distaste. Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me anymore, it would interfere with my reading. “Teach me?” I said in surprise. “He hasn’t taught me anything, Miss Caroline. Atticus ain’t got time to teach me anything,” I added, when Miss Caroline smiled and shook her head. (17)

Julia’s Analysis

The irony in this passage is that Miss Caroline tries to deter, rather than encourage, Scout’s ability to read at a more advanced level than her peers. Also, it hints that Miss Caroline has not received adequate training to deal with all the challenges a teacher will face. The conversation helps develop the novel’s 1930s setting by setting up a contrast between the way an unusual student such as Scout was treated then and the way she would be treated now. In today’s world, her individual precociousness would be valued and encouraged, but years ago all students were expected to be the same. Similarly, the use of “ain’t” reminds the reader of the rural Alabama setting. Grammatically, it seems like the second sentence should contain a semicolon rather than a comma, but the comma doesn’t slow the sentence down as much and conveys the feeling of a child relating a story about something that happened with her teacher at school.

provide the best models for illustrating grammar and rhetoric as an empowering tool for writers. When using texts as instructional models, we must deliberately and explicitly show the steps in the composing process, lest our students feel intimidated by masterful prose and conclude that they could never achieve such powerful effects through their own efforts. Instead, we must demonstrate that writing is hard work for *everyone*, and even the most accomplished, prolific authors revise to achieve the powerful, just-right arrangement of words and punctuation that we read in the pages of a published work. In these ways, we can help students forge connections between the rules of grammar and usage and their utilitarian value in conveying meaning. Pushing students to apply what they already know on an implicit level raises their awareness of what real writers do. They may not thank us for our efforts, but they will leave our classrooms better writers than they were when they entered at the beginning of the term.

Additional Resources

BURCH, C. BETH. *A Writer's Grammar*. New York: Longman, 2003.

As the title suggests, this reader friendly and entertaining text presents grammatical concepts from a writer's perspective. Burch's examples and activities are well suited to almost any teaching context.

EHRENWORTH, MARY, AND VICKI VINTON. *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.

Besides presenting innovative approaches for teaching grammar in ways that will help students develop as writers, Ehrenworth and Vinton include practical tools for planning lessons and integrating grammar into the curriculum.



Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a staple of secondary school curricula nationwide.

The novel has never been out of print since its initial publication in 1960 and continues to enjoy both critical and popular success worldwide.

To Kill a Mockingbird in the Classroom: Walking in Someone Else's Shoes examines ways of engaging students as they study Lee's novel. Included are collaborative learning, discussion, writing, and inquiry-based projects as well as activities related to the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The twelfth book in the NCTE High School Literature Series, this volume features sample student work and excerpts of relevant literary criticism and reviews.

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