
Idea Exchange

This section represents a venue for sharing the work of our teaching peers. More to the point, what follows are suggestions for solving specific teaching problems. There is more than a small chance that some of these practical tips might be useful for those of us who teach. Should you wish more information on one or more of these tips, contact the author at the e-mail address attached to the tip.

“One of my most successful units is a poetry unit. During the poetry unit, the students each memorize a poem and work on a close reading of the poem. By the end of the unit the students present their poems to the class and explicate them. The unintended effect of this exercise is that, when students recite their memorized poems, they do it slowly, carefully, with the poem on the overhead behind them. The other students follow along watching, listening, and the poem has a dramatic effect on them because of the deliberateness of the delivery.”—

Christine Brunkhorst
St. Thomas Academy
9th and 10th grade English

“When teaching the short story in creative writing,

I hand out cards to students. Each card has either a description of a character, or a description of a setting, or a description of a conflict. Students then talk to each other and form themselves into groups including two characters, one conflict, and one setting. Then students turn those ingredients into a quick sketch for a story, and we share. We can then talk about the nature of short story, its structure and its elements.”—

Kelly Smalstik
Henry Sibley High School
10th through 12th grades: World Literature and
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“After reading/studying *The Merchant of Venice*, we hold three debates. The class is divided into six groups and they spend about two hours preparing for their debate. Here are some proposed “debate” topics:

- Shylock is a villain in *The Merchant of Venice*
- The Christians show mercy in the play
- Justice is served by the end of the play

The structure of each debate follows this format:

- Affirm opening statements
- Negative opening statement
- Affirmative rebuttal
- Negative rebuttal
- Affirmative final statement
- Negative final statement” —

Heather Megarry
Ubah Medical Academy
Grades 9 through 12

“Here is a journal prompt to use when teaching *The Diary of Anne Frank*:

A dying Nazi soldier asks a Jewish prisoner in a concentration camp for forgiveness. What would you do if you were the Jewish prisoner?

Have students read selections from *Sunflower* between their first and second drafts of this writing prompt.”—

Bonnie Sparling
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“I was encouraged by Michael Lomonico’s comments on performance in the classroom because I am attempting to integrate student performance in all genres by assigning parts of short stories, poems, novels, and other literary types for students to read. When the students enter my room, I have a list of the characters and three narrators on the chalkboard. Now the kids know the routine. “Can I be Nancy? I want to be the Grandma,” laughs a burly twelve year-old boy. I randomly choose parts, and, if students don’t want to read aloud, they may pass their part to another student. Those kids who choose not to read aloud must follow along in the text. The kids love it and so do I.”—

Jennifer Hunt 7th grade English
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“Here’s a writing idea: ask students to write about what they want to be when they grow up on one side of a piece of paper. After they have finished, have them flip the paper over and write about what they would do with their lives if they had all the time in the world and no restrictions. Have a discussion afterward concerning whether the two pieces of writing each student has done say the same thing. Shouldn’t they? The discussion could go in lots of directions, but the focus here is goals and thinking clearly about what to do with one’s life.”—

Anne Warrington
Pine Island High School
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“Humanities students do a mini-photography unit which culminates in a final project where they walk around town (Pine Island is small) taking pictures. They then choose the one or two photographs that really capture the essence of Pine Island. This is a great project to do to remind the students who are going off to college where they’ve come from.”—

Michelle Prigge
Pine Island High School
English 9
Humanities (11th and 12th grades)
Basic College Composition (12 grade)

“Creating collages: students bring in items for a collage and explain how each item relates to whatever book we’re reading. They like seeing the collage build as the book progresses. On the exam, I have them choose several items from the collage and relate them to the story we’ve read.”—

Jennifer Henry
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“After going over all the story elements (plot, theme, character, setting, etc.), have students watch *White Squall*. Then have students create a newspaper about the movie showing all of the literary elements within it.”—

Jory Magel
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“Here’s a classroom management tip: Have each student write his/her name on a popsicle stick. Use the sticks throughout the year to randomly call on students, to divide them into groups, etc. This tactic keeps the students alert and prevents the

teacher from always calling on the same students.”—

Laura Meyer

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“Here’s a final essay topic for a Senior English class: “If I would have known then what I know now....” Then publish a few of the papers in next fall’s newspaper for tips for underclassmen.”—

Gerri Nielsen

11th and 12th grade English, Composition, Myths and Legends

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“When students are reading a Shakespeare play, let them voluntarily jump into parts as the parts come up. If no one jumps in right away, wait until someone does. I do this with my ninth graders and have found that students have a positive attitude about this approach. I can guess that they have a heightened sense of responsibility for the reading, the experience, the interpretation, and their learning.”—

Wes Jorde

Saint Thomas Academy

9th grade (rhetorical skills)12th grade (World

Literature,Composition)

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“Here’s three tips for reading and responding to literature:

- Use journal prompts to stimulate class discussion
- Incorporate students’ life experience into writing in response to literature
- Dedicate one class period per week to independent reading.”—

Frank Blankley

Grades 9 through 12

St. Thomas Academy
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“A tip for a writing or speaking assignment: Have students write or speak about a scar they have on their body and the interesting or fun or embarrassing story behind it.”—

Tom Weber
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St. Thomas Academy

“As a culminating activity after a ninth grade research project on a non-fiction book (on themes of tests, challenges, extreme adventure), students will be asked to give an oral presentation acting as the character in the book (persona).”—

Solfrid Ladstein
St. Thomas Academy
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“Start class with a reflection that parallels what you and your students are studying: for example, a poem by Yusef Komunyakha about Vietnam or a ‘60’s song when studying Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.”—

Donna Isaac
St. Thomas Academy
Junior American Literature; Composition Writing
Lab Director
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“Consider asking students in your poetry workshop to demonstrate the following principles of poetry ACTIVELY—“On your feet; act them out!”—

- Poetry is sound
- Poetry is rhythm

- Poetry is image

Kathleen R. Sevig

10th through 12th grade English

Shakespeare, World Literature, Creative Writing,

Honors English 11

“An idea for improving students’ writing and language skills: Have students free-write every day and develop a composition weekly using self-selected or pre-selected vocabulary words. The content for these papers is unlimited; the focus on the criteria for what will be graded will change for each assignment. The benefits of this assignment are multiple:

- Students get creative
- Students’ voice becomes stronger
- Shorter papers become easier to grade
- Students’ word choice becomes more precise
- Students get lots of writing practice
- No long lectures are required to clarify students’ responsibilities”

Lori Risbrudt

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“I give class time for all major pieces of writing. After topic selection and related activities, students write a draft. Then they do a second draft which they enter into a computer. They are urged to improve their first draft in any way they see fit. I tell them to ask any question they might have and I talk to them about their writing concern. They print out the second (word-processed) draft and take a pen or pencil to it to make it better again. The more evidence they put on the page that they are interacting with, the more points they get. Again, they can ask me for help or my opinion on what they’ve written. Then I read this draft and react to it, pointing out what I think each

writer can benefit from doing. Then they proceed to the next draft.”—

Richard Class
JWP High School/Senior High

“A procedure for doing a two-student collaborative research project:

- Two students choose one novel
- They read it
- They research critical sources
- They take careful notes
- They form a thesis that views the work through two critical lenses
- They write a research paper arguing which of the two lenses is “more revealing.” They must determine what the lenses reveal.
- They present the paper to the class using creativity and class involvement.”—

Bob Strandquist
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Note: The Idea Exchange is now a regular feature of *The Minnesota English Journal*. Most teachers are astonishingly busy. Sitting down to write a long paper is out of the question for people with five or more preps per day. Thus, we want our readers to “think small” for a few minutes. Jot down on an e-mail message (or an enclosure in an e-mail message in “Word”) to the *MEJ* editor a teaching tip, an idea about teaching a piece of literature that has worked for you with a particular audience, a writing prompt you’ve used to generate discussion, a strategy for developing discussion on a piece of literature, a writing assignment (along with the context you’ve created for it), a research exercise, or an effective way of dealing with the writing process or revision or mechanics. Label your e-mail

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“The Idea Exchange” and address it to straits@mnsu.edu.

Thanks in advance for contributing your ideas to this enterprise.

Bill Dyer

Co-Editor, *The Minnesota English Journal*