



Tips for Teachers

A Guide for Using *New Youth Connections*
in the Classroom

Sept / Oct 2004

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Go John Adams! John Adams students almost made a clean sweep of the letters column this month, and they did pretty well on the writing contest too. (Or, as they used to say in the Lotto ads, “You’ve got to be in it to win it.”) We want more teachers to assign letters and contests.

A letter to the editor is a great “do now” writing exercise. It requires the student to *read* the story and *write* something thoughtful in response. You can give the students as little or as much guidance as you like. But why not use this exercise to encourage them to take some baby steps toward the kind of writing they need to be doing in other classes? Here are two lessons, one basic and one slightly more complex.

Lesson One (Basic Letter/Short Essay)

Tell the students to pick a story to read. Or, pick a story for them, or perhaps limit their choice to three or four of the more substantive stories. We have a lot of provocative stories on the war, and the Republican convention. Two other stories

that raise provocative issues are “Showing My Faith on the Outside,” about wearing the hijab (p. 10) and “Stop the Street Spam,” about street catcalls (p. 24).

When you assign students to write a letter, give them this background:

—They should express an opinion about the story—positive, negative, otherwise.

—They need to be *specific*. If the teen likes the story, they need to say *what* they like, and *why* they like it. Same thing if they don’t like it.

—The basic format is that of a 5-paragraph (or even a 3-paragraph) essay:

1) Make a general statement, such as, “I can’t believe Caitlin got herself arrested in the protest. She shouldn’t have been anywhere near...”

2) Support your statement with facts, examples from the story, comparisons with your own life, etc. (This could be 1-3 paragraphs which elaborate on the theme she establishes in the first paragraph.)

3) Conclude. (“I’m sorry she was locked up so long, but I think Caitlin got what she deserved.”)

Lesson Two (Compare and Contrast Essay)

You can ask your students to compare and contrast two stories. They could agree with one and disagree with the other, or they could simply find relevant points of comparison. Several stories in this issue lend themselves to this kind of letter:

—“Why Not a Woman President?” (p. 15) vs. “Why Not an Immigrant President,”

Tips for Teachers is written for the bulk subscribers to *New Youth Connections* to help them use the magazine more effectively with teens in their classes and programs.

For more information, contact:
Youth Communication
224 W. 29th St., 2nd fl.,
New York, NY 10001
212-279-0708 ext.100



Kat Morris

(p. 15). Israel, India, Pakistan, England, and many other countries have had female heads of state. Is it about time for us? And, should the U.S. Constitution be amended to allow an immigrant to become president? These two short stories lend themselves to an especially easy “compare and contrast” letter on topics about which your students are sure to have an opinion.

—“In Training: JROTC Gave Me Discipline and Support” (p. 3) or “Army Recruiter Puts the Pressure On” (p. 4) vs. “Maybe I Didn’t Sacrifice Enough: A U.S. Soldier’s Iraq Story” (p. 16). The first two writers are mildly critical of military recruiting; the subject of the third story fought in Iraq and still doesn’t feel like she’s done enough.

—“Maybe I Didn’t Sacrifice Enough” (p. 16) vs. “Working for Peace” (p. 22)
Contrast a story about a committed soldier

Tips for Teachers is also available on our web site at:
www.youthcomm.org

Writing Contest

Page 2. This issue's contest prompt is:

"What's the Funniest Thing that's Ever Happened to You? Tell us the story."

Everyone has had funny moments in their life. Sometimes they're just plain hilarious, but in many cases the humor is related to emotions like embarrassment (and the event seems much funnier in hindsight that it did at the time).

To get students thinking about this, ask them for examples of funny things that have happened to them or their friends. Ask them if they've seen funny things, like on the "funny home video" TV shows. Ask them if they were told about funny things they did as children. What was funny? Why? Based on this discussion, ask each student to think of a funny experience from his or her own life, and ask them to describe the gist of it in one paragraph.

Then explain that the students are

going to write a short essay built around this experience. Tell them that writing this essay is a little like telling a joke: the funny part is the punch line. And, like in telling a joke, you don't usually tell the punch line first. You lead up to it in a way that makes it clear why it is so funny (so unexpected, so embarrassing, etc.).

So for example, if someone's "funniest experience" was the time they spilled their drink on themselves during a date, tried to cover it up, and then their date asked if they had wet their pants, they would want to lead up to that scene by talking about how important the date was, how much they liked the person and wanted to impress her, etc. etc.

Deadline: October 4, 2004



Stephanie Wilson

with a story by a young man who thinks the most honorable and courageous response to the war is to oppose it.

—"Young and Republican" (p. 6) vs. "Why Are You Protesting?" (pp. 6-7). The brief profiles of supporters and detractors of the Republican convention and Republican politics give plenty of opportunities for argument.

You may want to suggest a basic outline for the compare and contrast essay:

- 1) Make a general statement ("We've had enough native born white male presidents!")
- 2) Briefly summarize the two points you're comparing/contrasting (Writer A thinks such-and-such; writer B thinks so-and so)
- 3) Give your opinion or point of view, or explain what you've learned from these two points of view. Or evaluate the two points of view—is one more persuasively argued than the other? Why? (I agree [or disagree] because....)

Send the letters to Youth

Communication by October 4. We'll print the best ones in our November issue.

By using these lessons to teach the fundamental components of an essay (state a thesis, support the thesis, conclusion) it will provide a foundation for the kinds of writing your students will do all year long.

THE WAR AND THE ELECTION— Current events discussed in a way that your students can relate to

The war in Iraq and the presidential election will dominate the news for the next six weeks, but our students may feel that the discussion does not relate to their lives. Reading this issue—which is chock full of articles on those topics—will give your students important background information and help them feel like they are part of the national discussion. Here's a list of the article themes, followed by a few suggestions for discussions and lessons.

- JROTC provides good discipline, but it shouldn't be used to pressure teens to join the armed forces (p. 3)
- Armed forces recruiters can give a hard sell, and may play fast and loose with the facts (p. 4)
- Some youth support the Republican party while others protest their policies, including an NYC writer who was arrested and held for 50 hours (pp. 6-7)
- The ins and outs of voting, (pp. 12-13). Note: Students who are 18 or older can register to vote in the presidential



Karolina Zanieshenko

election until October 8. They can get a voter registration form mailed to them by calling 1-866-868-3692. See story p. 12. Consider ordering a batch of forms and giving them out to your 18-year-old students.

- Arguments for having a woman president, and for allowing immigrants to run for president (p. 15)
- Video games as a recruiting device (p. 16)
- An account of a U.S. soldier's time in Iraq (p. 17)
- A teen writes about working for the War Resister's League, one of the oldest anti-war groups in the country (p. 22)



Essay of Argumentation: Should JROTC Be Allowed in School?

One of the genres in the popular *Writer's Inc.* high school English textbook is the Essay of Argumentation. This is an essential form to master because it is commonly used in English classes and on standardized tests. More importantly, we're trying to convince people of our position all the time in life. Teens want their parents to do things for them. Employees want their boss to do something. The ability to craft a good argument is a powerful tool.

To write the Essay of Argumentation, the *Writer's Inc.* text suggests the following method:

"Choose a topic about which it is possible to write the following: (a) a proposition or statement you will argue for, (b) argument(s) supporting your proposition, (c) argument(s) opposing your proposition. Second, look for information (evidence) with which to build arguments for and against your proposition. And third, use the information to write an essay which convinces your reader that your proposition is right."

Several stories in this issue provide the background that students need to write a short Essay of Argumentation. "In Training" (p. 3), lends itself particularly well to this genre because it is a very balanced article (see lesson below). "Young and Republican" and "Why Are You Protesting?" and "Stop the Street Spam,"

p. 24 are on topics that are likely to stir strong feelings, so they may also work well as the basis for an essay.

Lesson: Essay of Argumentation, based on "In Training."

- 1) Write Essay of Argumentation on the board.
- 2) Write the method (above) on the board, or put it on a handout.
- 3) Briefly explain that knowing how to argue well gives you power, and this lesson will sharpen your arguing skills.
- 4) Have students read "In Training" (or read aloud with class).
- 5) Have a brief discussion with the class: Should JROTC be allowed in school? (You can play devil's advocate. If everyone is in favor of it, point out how it can be used to pressure teens into joining the armed forces. If everyone is opposed, point out that the writer was grateful for the discipline and order she found in the program.)
- 6) Tell the students they have to take a stand either for or against allowing JROTC in school and support their stand in an Essay of

Argumentation.

- 7) Remind them that once they select their "proposition" they have to find evidence for and against it. Then they have to write an essay with this as the basic outline:
 - a) State proposition
 - b) Give facts and arguments for it
 - c) Acknowledge facts and arguments against it
 - d) Based on the above, make the case for their proposition.

Writer's Inc. suggests evaluating the essay on these criteria:

- Is the proposition clear?
- Are the supporting arguments clear, logical, and convincing? Are opposing arguments fairly presented and dealt with?
- Does the conclusion follow from the evidence and arguments presented?

Hint: You can suggest that students read "In Training" a second time. While they do it, they can put a circle around each place the writer gives an argument or states a fact in favor of JROTC, and put a square around each place the writer expresses a reservation. They can also pull from their personal experience and opinions, but there is a lot of good information right in the story for them to use.

Follow-up: Debate on JROTC

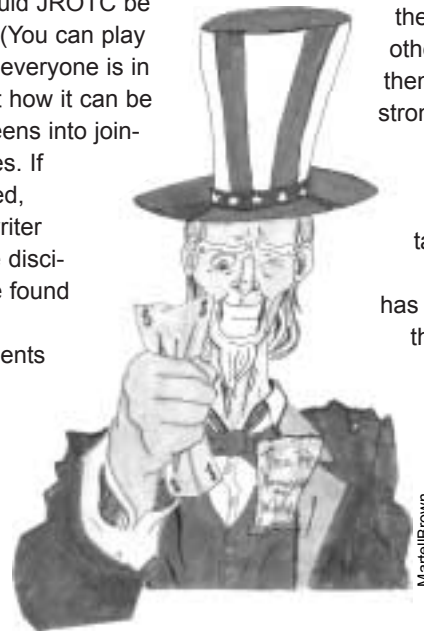
When students have completed their essays, it would be pretty easy to stage a debate. Divide the class into pro-ROTC and anti-ROTC teams. Have them read each other's essays and compile the best arguments for their side and the best arguments against the other side. Each team should then make a list of their strongest points.

The pro-ROTC team should select a leader, who will make a 3 minute presentation of their argument.

The anti-ROTC team then has three minutes to present their arguments.

The pro-ROTC team has two minutes to rebut the anti-ROTC arguments.

The anti-ROTC team has two minutes to rebut the pro-ROTC arguments.



You are the judge, and you make a ruling on the winner of the debate, based on the clarity of their arguments and the strength of their rebuttal.

Standing Up for Your Beliefs— Discussion and Writing Exercise

Maria Zaman is a Muslim, and she wears the hijab, a headscarf that covers her hair, neck and shoulders (“Showing My Faith on the Outside,” p. 10).

Before reading this story, ask your students why they think she wears the hijab. Do her parents force her to? Religious leaders? Can they think of anything comparable (such as Jewish men wearing a yarmulke or Orthodox Jews wearing special clothes, Amish people wearing conservative clothing, etc.)

How do they think her non-Muslim friends respond to her wearing the hijab? What about people on the street?

Do they think wearing the hijab is a political statement? A fashion statement? A religious statement?

After students have speculated about Maria’s motivation, have them read the story and the sidebar. They will probably be surprised to learn that no one else in her family wears one, and her mom was opposed, but that she chose to wear it to be closer to God. They may not be surprised to discover that she was ostracized by some friends for her choice.

Ask the class: What do they think of Maria’s decision? Do they support it? Oppose it? Why?

Ask them: Regardless of her decision, what kind of person do they think Maria is? What do they think of her going her own way and making a very public display of something that many people don’t understand or don’t like? Could she have shown her respect for God in a less conspicuous way? Would that have been better? Is she cutting off opportunities for herself? Or making more opportunities for herself?

Can students think of times they’ve gone against the wishes of their family, or their peers, for something they believed in? What was it? Why did they do it? What were people’s reactions at first? How did they respond later? Do they think they made the right decision? Do they regret anything? In hindsight, what would they have done differently, if anything?



Writing Assignment: Being True to Myself

Each student should think of a time they went against the wishes of family or friends (or some other person or group that was important to them) to follow their own conscience, or just to do what they wanted to do. If they haven’t ever done anything like that, they can write about something they hope to do or might do in the future. (This could be something as dramatic as wearing a hijab, or as mundane as getting a piercing or tattoo, or dating someone their parents would disapprove of.) Here’s a suggested outline for the essay (which you can give to students).

1) Explain why the thing that you did (or might do) is not accepted by your parents or peers. Show how strongly they would disapprove and why.

2) Explain why it is important for you to do this thing.

3) Explain the consequences of doing it. How did it affect your sense of yourself? Your relationships with others? Give an example.

4) Reflect on your decision: Was it the right one? Do you have any regrets? Could you have done it differently? How do you feel about it now?

Essays can be turned into letters to the Editor, and we may publish them in the next issue.

TV and Me

Two teens in this issue write about TV shows that are important to them. Lily Mai describes how watching *Friends* helped alleviate the pain of losing her grandmother. Miranda Neubauer is obsessed with the behind-the-scenes view of politics in *The West Wing*.

Have your students read one or both stories, and then have them write an essay explaining why they like their favorite show. Tell them that their goal is to show *why* they like the show they choose to write about more than any other. To do that they have to show two things in their essay:

1) Enough about themselves and their lives so that we know what will interest them and why.

2) Enough about the show and how its themes intersect with their interests to convince us that they really love it.

For example, the death of her grandmother makes Lily very sad. She gives several very specific examples of how *Friends* helps her deal with those feelings and lifts her spirits. In one episode, everyone wears silly costumes. In another, two of the characters get married. Finally, she realizes she’s really ready to move past her grandmother’s death when Phoebe sings an offensive song about a dead grandmother, and Lily can accept it.

Miranda is a U.S. citizen living in Germany who supported Al Gore in the 2000 election. *The West Wing*, which features a liberal president, keeps her in touch with U.S. political issues and educates her about the complexity of politics.

In both cases, the writers convincingly show how their own interests and emotions relate to the characters and themes on their favorite shows.

