4 Varying Instructional Approaches

Teaching the literature of various time periods, authors, genres, and themes, and providing experiences and assistance with the structures for writing and speaking, encompass most of what an English teacher does. As a result, deciding how to vary instructional methods in the teaching of content and skills related to these materials and assessments will be the primary concern and focus of English teachers when they prepare for block scheduling. A list of methods, along with descriptions of activities, would help teachers prepare for instruction on the block in the short term, but once these activities are used over a period of time teachers and students will become bored. And if the activity doesn’t connect to a bigger picture, it will seem like just something to do to break up the class period but not necessarily very purposeful or connected to the what or why of the content or skills being studied. This chapter, then, will provide suggestions and ideas for developing focused instructional strategies to use on the block schedule within a framework that will be generative of new approaches.

Looking at reading, writing, and speaking as processes where students create meaning and demonstrate their skills and the understandings they’ve constructed creates a context from which to vary instructional approaches. Framing instruction around what learners do when they approach a text (one they’re reading or one they’re creating) can be a guide for choosing methods. Making the “things” that readers, writers, and speakers do—the strategies they use to make sense of text—more visible, even making them an explicit part of the lesson—allows teachers to vary instruction in a way that will continue to produce ideas for new approaches while supporting students in their learning of the content and skills of the English classroom.

One reading strategy that most English teachers are aware of and use with students is KWL—what I know, what I want to know, what I learned (Ogle 1986). This strategy highlights some of what readers do while reading, and I used it often during the first months of teaching on the block schedule, because the steps involved in using the strategy incorporate a variety of instructional approaches that could be completed in one class period. As a way to introduce some of the short stories in the unit “How Does the World Work?” (see Figure 3 in Chapter
3), I had students brainstorm all they knew (K) about the difficulties that immigrants have in fitting into the mainstream American culture, a topic related to some of the texts they would be reading. (Of course, in our brainstorming, we also had to define what the mainstream culture was.) Students worked in small groups and listed their ideas on newsprint to share with the rest of the class. Another option would be to have them work as an entire class to generate the ideas while you record them on an overhead or on newsprint.

Next, students generated a list of questions about the topic, related to what they wanted (W) to know. Again, I had students generate these questions in small groups, but I could have done it with the entire class working together. I instructed the students to use the questions they'd recorded to guide their reading of one of the short stories. They should be looking for answers to their questions, I told them, realizing that not all questions would be answered and that some new ones would arise. Students recorded the answers they found, along with new questions (and answers), on a chart I had devised for this experience, but they could have just as easily done this work in their journals.

After reading the short story, students shared their answers—what they learned (L)—in small groups, but again, this sharing could have been done with the entire class. At the end of the ninety-minute class period, students wrote a journal entry in which I asked them to reflect on their learning about the immigrant experience and on how the KWL strategy had worked for them.

I have described this strategy for several reasons. First, it shows how a strategy can guide the planning of a ninety-minute lesson and provide the basis for varying instruction. Second, this strategy highlights some of what readers tend to do before looking at the print on a page or after setting the text aside. Reading isn't something that happens just while the eyes are moving across the page. By asking "What can I do to help my students better understand the text before they read?" teachers can begin to find ways to support comprehension and vary instruction (Crafton 1982). Asking what can be done during and after reading will guide teachers in the same way. Third, this strategy shows that reading, writing, and speaking are not separate and distinct processes. Although in this case one entire class period on the block was used to read one short story, the students were also involved in group discussion (speaking), and they were writing. Fourth, the KWL strategy demonstrates the approximate thirty/thirty/thirty division of time that is useful when first beginning to teach on the block schedule. That is, in this example, approximately thirty minutes were used for prereading, thirty
minutes for reading, and thirty minutes for after-reading discussion. Breaking instruction into these thirty-minute chunks makes the ninety-minute period easier to manage when first teaching on the block schedule. Finally, though the KWL strategy was explained in terms of reading, it is a strategy that can also be used with writing and speaking. As students prepare for research papers or informative speeches, they can ask: What do I know about my topic? What do I want to know? And, What did I learn? For example, in my sophomore English class, after reading Night (Wiesel 1960), The Children’s Story (Clavell 1981), “Open Letter to a Young Negro” (Owens, 1970), poems and artwork created by children during the Holocaust and collected in I Never Saw Another Butterfly (Volavkova 1993), and a collection of current news articles and editorials, students chose a social issue that they had read about and/or were interested in investigating. The first day of research (again I used the thirty/thirty/thirty timeframe for planning) began with students listing and writing out what they knew about their topic. Next, they generated a list of questions, and, during the final thirty minutes, students went to the library and/or computer lab to locate one source that might answer some of their questions. During the first thirty minutes of the next class period, students read from their sources, and they spent the second thirty minutes writing what they had learned. The final thirty minutes were set aside for individual choices that included more reading, obtaining another source, revising questions, or continuing their writing. (This and many other strategies mentioned in this chapter are discussed further in Appendix D.)

**Reading as a Process**

Many English teachers recall the moment in a college or high school English class when they realized from a discussion that there was so much more to literature than the literal meanings they had previously been getting from their reading. Invariably, this moment occurs in a class discussion when several people find special meaning in something that others hadn’t noticed or considered important. Usually a debate of sorts ensues, with multiple interpretations being offered, which in turn leads to other connections to the text, comparisons to other texts, and, possibly, what is known about the author. These connections lead to more debates with even more ideas being generated. Some English teachers identify this exchange as the moment when they decided to become an English teacher. It’s this passion for the ideas that can emerge from reading that English teachers hope to produce in their classrooms. But this
type of talk doesn’t just happen—it occurs because readers have reached a certain level of sophistication in how they examine and interpret text, and/or because the teacher has established the conditions necessary for this to happen by supporting readers in the process.

Usually, the first reading of a text is aimed at understanding. After readers develop basic understanding, then they can examine the piece and study it in ways that allow them to notice, among other things, the author’s craft, compelling story lines, and specifics about characters. If readers are supported in making sense of the text first, then they can shift their focus to studying it as a piece of literature that holds many varied interpretations (Smith 1995). In other words, readers will be able to see what they couldn’t see when they were working to understand.

Many of the reading strategies described below can be used to support readers in their attempts to understand, and to push them toward more sophisticated thinking. In deciding how to support reading and vary instruction on the block at Mundelein High School (MHS), we turned to books and journal articles, suggestions by colleagues at our school or at conference sessions, and methods we observed other teachers using. Just as many of these strategies, however, derived from ideas that emerged once we started paying attention to what we did as we read, and then devising an instructional approach that pushed our students to do the same thing. By always asking the students how a strategy helped them, and what they liked or disliked about it, and why, we were able to revise some approaches, discard others, and create new ones.

Before Reading

When planning a lesson for teaching a piece of literature on the block schedule, teachers now have time to introduce the piece in any number of ways. This introduction can be a way to help readers begin to develop an understanding of the text before they read it. This is not a new idea in teaching literature, but the difference here lies in the fact that we are using the reading process to guide and help make decisions about how the text is introduced. For example, readers usually preview a text in some way prior to reading. This preview may cause the reader to visualize the setting and some of the events that may take place in the story. Other elements—author’s name, the copyright, the genre in which the piece is written—also contribute to the meanings readers make before actually reading the text. Using this kind of knowledge of how readers work to comprehend can help us develop instructional strategies that will highlight these processes.
Seeing the story as it evolves is an important comprehension strategy that can't be tapped if the story is outside the experience of the learner. That's not to say that if readers haven't been to the place in the story or experienced the same events in their lives they can't visualize the text. But, if they've never even seen a picture or can't bring one to mind, the reading would be similar to the experience of hearing a description of a friend's trip to a foreign country without being able to look at pictures of what is being described.

One way to fill this gap is to incorporate artwork, photographs, and videos, which can help students visualize period dress, geography, living conditions, and so on. For example, during a social justice unit titled “How Do We Create a More Just and Equitable World?” we put a collection of large, black-and-white commercial prints of the Holocaust—living quarters at the concentration camps, the gas chambers, the room of shoes, and the train cars—on classroom tables prior to the students reading of Night (Wiesel 1960). Students examined these visual “texts” and talked about them with other students at their tables. Groups of photos were passed from table to table, with students continuing to talk about what they were seeing and thinking. After examining these pictures, students were better able to predict some of the events that might take place in the story, and they said they could see what was happening as the author described the concentration camp, the living conditions, and the people.

When reading several essays and short stories about American Indians, one teacher’s personal video of a drive through the reservations north of the Grand Canyon helped students to better understand the perspectives that were depicted in their reading. Being from the Midwest, they imagined land to be the type that they were used to seeing—flat, rich black soil filled with row after row of corn and beans. The poverty of the land and resources on the reservation was something they couldn't have imagined without pictures.

Brainstorming strategies for situating the text in the historical and societal time period is another way for readers to begin to understand the text before reading. Strategies similar to the K portion of KWL tap into what students already know about a topic. Readers might make a list or a cluster/web—about, for example, the role of women in society during the time period in which Kate Chopin wrote or about the time period in which A Doll's House (Ibsen 1992) was set—as a way to begin thinking about how the characters might be depicted and/or what statements the author might be trying to make in the work. Similarly, many
students don’t get a full understanding of A Separate Peace (Knowles 1985) until they recall and/or learn more about private boarding schools and the society that typically comprises the population of students attending them. Students could begin a cluster based upon what they know and then add to that cluster while watching a series of film clips in which boarding schools are depicted.

By conducting mini-research-investigations prior to reading several related pieces or a novel, readers can gain background information that will support their comprehension. For example, in preparation for reading Kaffir Boy (Mathabane 1998), a sophomore English class brainstormed all they knew about South Africa—its history, government, and people. They discovered that they couldn’t recall very much. Before beginning the book, then, partners chose topics and went to the media center to find answers. This was truly meant to be a mini-research-project, so the students had thirty minutes to do their research, and another thirty minutes were spent with partners providing the class with the answer(s) to each question. Many of the artifacts of this investigation—maps and pictures, in particular—were attached to the classroom bulletin board set up for the novel.

Videos and audiotapecs can help students hear the language of the text. Having students watch the video of one of Shakespeare’s plays prior to reading another one of his works is a common way to help students who are unfamiliar with the language; at MHS, this was particularly helpful for our second-language students. At the same time, we knew that if we wanted our students to become better readers, they needed to read, and showing videos took away from reading time. On a traditional schedule, watching a video could take nearly four days of class time—time enough for students to read and discuss two to three short stories. On the block schedule, however, only one class period would need to be used, and, even though the video took the same number of minutes, it felt like we were using less time because it was consolidated into one block. In addition, we discovered that we made up for the lost time once we got to the required readings, because students weren’t struggling so much with the text. After listening to several of Edgar Allan Poe’s works on audiotapec, for example, students read other works by the same author with the voice of the dramatic interpretation in their head. And once the students heard Luis Rodriguez read some of his poetry, they were able to read more of his poems with the same volume, rhythm, and articulation in their minds.

Another way to help readers begin to comprehend the chosen text before they begin reading is to explore poetry and children’s books on
related themes. We discovered one approach for using poetry and children's books to introduce a novel in an overwhelming moment when we were just trying to get by—a revised curriculum and a new schedule had left us with little time to gather together these types of resources. Knowing we wanted to introduce the core novel by reading some poems that were thematically related, but not having time to gather appropriate selections, someone suggested asking the librarian to pull some of the best collections together and put them on carts. These were wheeled into our rooms and students spent thirty minutes going through the books at their tables in search of poems that depicted several of the themes identified in the book they were about to read and marking the ones that seemed to fit. Students then shared their favorite poems with others at their table and from these chose one that their group would read to the class. Not only did the students enjoy this strategy (which we continued to use), but also we were able to compile a list of titles for future reference in much less time than it would have taken us alone.

We used a similar strategy with children's books when beginning a unit geared to the question “What is culture, and how does it influence us?” Not having a collection at school, we asked students to bring in some of their favorite childhood books. Students shared their books at tables, and then we examined them from a critical perspective to identify “lessons” the stories taught us about “right” and “wrong,” gender roles, and how cultural beliefs shape who we are. Again, many of these titles were added to our enrichment list, saving us a lot of planning time the next time we taught the unit.

All of the prereading strategies suggested here focus readers by highlighting important aspects of the text they will be reading. What readers bring to the text will influence their interpretations. Give readers a text to read for a test, and they will read differently and take away different information and ideas than they would if instructed to read for discussion or debate. If students are reading to gather information, they should be told to read for that purpose, and they might even be given information-gathering strategies that might be helpful. Students reading a variety of coming-of-age stories could record the similarities and differences in the characters' experiences by using a T-Chart during and after reading, if they know that this is a purpose that should be guiding their reading (see Appendix D for further discussion of this type of approach).

One strategy that both sets a purpose and helps guide readers through the text is Perspective Taking. Roles can be assigned to students
before they begin reading, and students then try to read the text as the person whose perspective they are taking would read it. One of the favorite children’s books that students brought from home was *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein 1964). This book was read aloud after students chose the perspective of the tree or the boy. The discussion that followed the oral reading ranked as one of the most spirited and engaging conversations students had. Some students were mad because we had “ruined” one of their favorite childhood stories—they could never think of it in quite the same way again. Many of the boys in the class were uncomfortable with the feminist perspective that emerged, and a few students were able to see the parent-child relationship in a different way after discussing the book. Students who had been reluctant to share even one idea during discussion now engaged repeatedly. They said this was due in part to the fact that they had identified with their character and that they felt comfortable sharing because they were the experts on their perspective. Another use of Perspective Taking is to create character scenarios, where brief situational and attitudinal descriptions are distributed to students prior to reading. A third approach is to have students choose a type of person—say, an artist, a coach, or a news reporter—from a list that the class develops, and a forth option is to have students assume roles of characters and/or authors from other literature they’ve read.

**During Reading**

One of the best things about block scheduling is that time is now available to engage in one of the activities English teachers most value—reading. Since it’s difficult on the traditional schedule to justify spending a whole class period reading, this activity becomes one of the most common homework assignments. It’s unfortunate that what we value is what we have students do outside of school. With the extended class periods that block scheduling offers, a portion of the period can be used for reading, which can be followed by discussion. This not only shows students that we value reading, but it also assures that all students have read, which facilitates better discussions for comprehension, because the text is fresh in the minds of readers and the questions are fresh—readers are still curious about the answers.

Most of what readers do while reading takes place in the head, but there are some instructional strategies that can support comprehension while students are reading and provide variety in the day-to-day methods that are used on the block schedule. Any format for recording ideas after reading can (and probably should) be used while readers are
reading. Again, the ideas for strategies to use while students are reading come from teachers being aware of their own processes and then determining ways to replicate these processes in their instruction.

In most schools, students don’t get the opportunity to read in authentic ways, because they don’t own their texts. One of those authentic approaches is to mark up the text. How can they learn highlighting or underlining skills, or writing in the margins, unless we give them texts with which they can do this? Photocopying short stories or an occasional chapter from a novel and leaving wide margins gives readers a chance to record their thoughts while reading.

Self-stick notes are another way to mark a text while reading. Students can identify portions of the text that they want to reread or where they had questions, found information related to their purpose for reading, discovered an interesting quote, or located items they want to share at discussion time.

Writing or representing ideas in some fashion while reading is another strategy readers use while reading. Journals or learning logs, Bookmarks, and Written Conversation (see descriptions in Appendix D and in the next section of this chapter) can all be used as readers think of something that deserves figuring-out time or generate ideas they want to hold on to. Many students prefer to draw an image that comes to mind, a symbol representing an idea that was considered, or a metaphor they’ve thought of. A strategy called Sketch to Stretch (Harste, Short, and Burke 1988) provided the best version we found of this process. Students can record sketches in their journals or on a sheet of paper kept next to them or tucked into a book while reading.

Stopping while reading and talking about the text is another strategy readers use to help them comprehend while reading. Say Something, a strategy where a portion of the text is read and then two or more readers stop to say something to each other, is another during-reading strategy that can help students comprehend the text (Harste, Short, and Burke 1988). This can be done with a short story or informational piece where sections or pages are read silently (or aloud with a partner) and then students stop at agreed-upon points to talk before proceeding with the next part of the text.

Say Something is particularly effective to use while reading a text aloud to the class. Our students, regardless of grade or ability level, like to have the first chapter of a novel read aloud as a way to make sure they are understanding. This strategy can generate interest from the beginning of a novel, and sometimes it is needed in order to motivate many students to continue reading. We also found that reading the last
chapter aloud and stopping at various points to have students talk to each other, or "say something," was an effective and exciting way to end the book. ReQuest, a strategy used in much the same way as Say Something, focuses on reciprocal questioning during reading as a way to support student understanding of difficult texts.

As stated in the previous section, the purpose that has been set prior to reading can guide the way readers approach the text and the ideas they pull from it. For example, when we had students reading a text for characterization, we gave them a Graphic Organizer on which to record the information as it was uncovered in the text. Teachers teaching the elements of plot might provide a Graphic Organizer of some sort that would help students record information as the plot unfolds in the story and thus would serve as a guide during reading.

After Reading

The purpose that has been established before reading should guide what is done after reading. Students can use writing or any other form of representing their ideas after reading in many of the same ways suggested in the "During Reading" section. The difference might be that when using these strategies after reading they would explore ideas in more depth or detail. And again, students will often share their after-reading ideas with other learners.

One strategy we used for having students record their ideas during and after reading chapters in a novel is called Bookmarks (Watson 1978). Cutting 8½-by-11-inch sheets of paper in half lengthwise creates two bookmarks that students can use for the same type of writing that they might record in a journal. The difference is that these are often more easily available if they are placed inside a novel. We found this strategy useful when we were first having students write in response to their reading, because the size of a bookmark was less intimidating than a full sheet of paper. This was also a strategy to get students to write during reading (because a bookmark was right there in their book). As an after-reading strategy, we required one bookmark for each chapter.

Written Conversation (Harste, Short, and Burke 1988) is an after-reading strategy that students particularly enjoy because it capitalizes on an activity they engage in quite naturally—writing notes to their classmates. In this strategy, readers simply write a note to a partner after reading and then exchange notes and write a response. These conversations can take place on paper or on computer and can be exchanged with someone else in the class or someone in another class.
Since a portion of the curriculum at Mundelein identified core pieces that all students would read, we could arrange to read some of the same materials on the same day and exchange notes between, say, third-period junior English classes—it simply required that notes were ready to pass across or down the hall at an agreed-upon time. Another variation of this strategy is to take students to the computer lab to write a note and then do "musical chairs" as a way to move to another computer and respond to the original author’s ideas. Of course, partners can also be assigned, and, for most students, this provides a different learning experience, since writing to someone you know is different from writing to an unknown partner. Written conversation beyond the classroom can also be done through e-mail exchanges. Yet another option begins with the teacher, who writes the first part of a letter on a sheet of paper that is then photocopied for each student in the class (it can also be written on an overhead transparency). This approach can help assure that students notice or consider certain aspects of the text that the teacher thinks are important.

In order to study literature beyond "just understanding it," readers sometimes need to go back into the text to reread. One strategy that students enjoy is what we termed Quote-Response. With this after-reading strategy, readers go back into the text and pick a quote from the reading. This quote might be a favorite line or the sentence that best answers one of the class questions. It might also be the passage that best depicts the theme or best describes a character. Again, whatever purpose has been set could guide the choices students make. Once students have chosen their sentence, they should record it in some way and write about it. This strategy is a great way to have students prepare for and enter into discussion, which often begins by students sharing their quote and talking about it.

A variation of this strategy is Most Important Word (Padak 1992), wherein the reader describes the essence of the chapter, story, or essay in one word. We usually had students write their word on an index card and then flip the card over to list the reasons for their choice. The students then entered discussion by telling the group their word choice and sharing their reasons. At the end of discussion students could choose a new word or stay with their initial word, or the group could work toward consensus on a word. Their final choices and their reasoning could be recorded on a piece of paper, either in their journal or on a new card.

Save the Last Word for Me (Burke in Harste, Short, and Burke 1988) is an approach for sharing quotes identified when using the Quote-Response and Most Important Word strategies. Students bring their chosen
word or quote to the discussion, and other group members respond. After everyone has shared their reaction or the meaning elicited from the quote or word, the person bringing the chosen text to the discussion gets to have the last word.

Most Important Word is especially useful in helping students make sense of and discuss poetry. Copies of poems can be photocopied, and a Most Important Word can be chosen for each stanza and written in the margins. This can be done individually, with a partner, or in groups. After determining the meaning of each stanza, a word can be chosen for the poem as a whole.

Most of the after-reading strategies described here can be taken into discussion as springboards for the ideas that are shared. For example, with any of the writing-to-learn strategies, students could mark one or several of their ideas to share with their group by highlighting, underlining, or starring these in their writing. After discussing these ideas, students can record the ideas that were generated by the group in response to the ideas they brought to the table.

If a theme or unit question has been identified as a focus for the materials students are reading, a portion of some discussions could focus on how the text relates to the theme or helps to answer the unit question. Again, the purpose that has been established before reading should guide what is done after reading.

Another format for discussion is to have students draw symbols or sketches to represent the theme, or a character, and then share their results with the group. Using the Save the Last Word for Me process, each group member explains what he or she sees in the symbol or sketch and offers an interpretation of what is being depicted. After everyone has talked about the drawing, the person whose sketch is being discussed tells the group what he or she intended and shares any new ideas sparked by the discussion.

Posting questions on an inquiry board whenever they arise is another strategy that was easier to use once we were on the block schedule. When questions arose that couldn’t be answered during discussion or while reading, we wrote them on pieces of construction paper and attached them to a bulletin board created especially for this purpose. Eventually, these questions were used for a mini-research-experience where students chose a card from the board, spent a portion of the class period finding an answer, and then explained the answer in an impromptu speech.

Below are two sample lesson plans that incorporate some of the suggested before-, during- and after-reading strategies.
Day 1
30 min. Read children’s story aloud to the class using Say Something strategy.
45 min. Read Chapter 1 of novel aloud to students.
15 min. Written Conversation—Have students write notes to assigned partners, exchange, and write responses.

Day 2
5 min. Identify areas in Written Conversation to discuss in small groups.
20 min. Discuss Chapter 1.
35 min. Read Chapter 2 (identify purpose for students so they can focus their reading).
10 min. Quote-Response—Have students go back into the text to find a quote that best matches the purpose that was set.
20 min. Share quotes in discussion.

What We Learned

- Using reading strategies as a way to vary instruction on the block can promote the teaching of reading and improve students’ reading skills. By the time our students were juniors and seniors, they read more and were reading more difficult materials than they had been prior to the changes we made in our instruction. Any loss of content (literature) caused by focusing on before-, during-, and after-reading strategies was more than made up for over time.

- Taking time during department meetings to talk about the strategies we were using helped us to see that there are many ways in which teachers can approach a strategy. Again, this was one of the most beneficial ways for us to continue to prepare and continue to learn new and varied approaches for teaching on the block. The strategies we discovered and shared were written up and compiled in a strategy book (a project one teacher took on for a graduate class) as we learned more about reading, discovered new variations, and gathered student samples.

Writing and Speaking as a Process

Writing and formal speaking are discussed together, because the end product of both processes is a text in either written or spoken form. Preparation for formal speaking assignments usually requires that
students create a written draft that goes through much the same process that other types of written texts go through. With the exception of how the final draft is delivered, many of the genres or formats are similar for writing and speaking.

On a traditional schedule, teachers usually discuss in class the topics for writing and speaking as well as the specific formats to be used, and students typically produce the assignment as homework—again, as with reading, time constraints cause us to relegate what we really value to the realm of homework. On the block schedule, however, time is available for writing and preparing speeches during class. As suggested with reading instruction, teachers can examine what they do before, during, and after drafting a text as a way to create instructional strategies that both support writers and vary instruction. Much has been written about the various prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing “stages” of writing, and most teachers have incorporated these or related strategies into their writing instruction.

The teachers at Mundelein had been highlighting the writing process for many years before going to the block schedule, but we had never had the luxury of putting all of the parts of the process together for students during one class period. Typically, we had provided instruction on format and put students through prewriting activities during one class period, then required that they write a draft as homework. The next day, we would try to do some form of peer feedback so that students could get ideas for revisions that they would work on as homework. (I use the word “try” because theoretically we believed in the value of peer feedback, but instructionally it was never one of our strong points.) So, when we started planning for the block schedule, we decided that we would look at everything writers do when they write as a potential in-class activity that we could highlight in our instruction, realizing that our biggest challenge was figuring out how to improve our methods for helping students learn to revise their work.

Because we could go directly from a prewriting activity to writing a rough draft in the same class period on the block schedule, we discovered that students didn’t lose momentum between prewriting activities and their rough draft. They were also better able to work their way through stumbling blocks in their writing knowing they would be able to get ideas for revision from their peers during Authors’ Circle (Harste, Short, and Burke 1988), the instructional strategy that we eventually began to use for peer feedback, as described later in this chapter. The writing process became more cyclical with less distinction between the stages once we had extended periods of class time, because we had
the time to personalize the process or attend to the specific needs and questions of writers as they arose.

Discoveries from Experimentation with Writing and Speaking as Processes

It wasn't easy for us to give time for writing in class or to spend class time for repeated peer feedback (Authors' Circle) discussions. In the back of our minds we knew that we didn't really have more class time—the block schedule only created that illusion when planning for a class period. We thought that if we were now incorporating all aspects of the writing process within class time, it would mean we had to give up other content. And, we were already feeling like we had given up too much content with the reading strategies we had incorporated into the literature portion of our curriculum. But we discovered that much of what we had been doing with reading—the processes we had highlighted and the work students had done—prepared them for the writing and speaking assignments they would be required to take to final draft.

In revising our curriculum, we had been aware of choosing materials that could serve as models for the written work and for the speeches students would give. But without being aware of it, we had integrated our own "content" areas of reading, writing, and speaking. And, it was this integration that gave us the gift of time that we were able to use for writing in class and getting feedback for revisions before the final draft or performance.

As with reading, we found that outside sources helped us determine strategies to support students when they were writing or preparing for a speech, but we also learned to rely on our own experiences as writers and speakers to guide the instructional decisions we made for students. For example, we knew from experience that having an understanding of the structures for a required piece of writing or a formal presentation helped guide the drafting process; the guidelines that our university instructors gave us were helpful, but they weren't enough. We often asked for or went in search of papers that had been written for the same purpose and/or audience. An in-the-head analysis of these pieces usually got us started on our writing and pushed us in certain directions throughout the process. Rather than having a few students figure out how to do this on their own (in the same way we had stumbled onto this strategy on our own, outside of any classroom structures), we decided to make it part of our instruction.

We had all had the bloody paper experience (well, most of us had), and knew this wasn't an approach that fostered an understanding of
our strengths or processes, nor had it helped us to set goals for what we should do the next time we had a writing assignment. Reflecting on our processes also led us to the conclusion that writing improvement occurred most often when we were aware of our processes and our strengths; we could tap into and use this knowledge when writing. Our reflections made us aware that our weaknesses were areas we usually dealt with during the revision and editing stages—most often alongside another writer. But true understanding of what needed to be done with our writing or speaking was a personal reflection based on informative feedback from others.

The remaining sections of this chapter were written with the assumption that teachers reading this book understand and use the writing process in their work with students. For any who don’t, many sources are available that describe how to teach writing as a process and that provide instructional strategies to use with students. In lieu of repeating these approaches in this text, a list of writing process resources can be found at the end of the chapter. Most of these recommended sources will not discuss writing instruction in terms of the block, but longer time periods with students should make most of the suggested approaches seem doable. The remaining sections of this chapter discuss details and examples of the discoveries we made in our experimentation and research that both supported writers and provided us with many more and different instructional methods than we had used in the past. We found that a number of instructional changes that would have been difficult to implement on a traditional schedule were much easier to work with in the extended periods of time we had with students on the block: creating assessment instruments with students; integrating reading, writing, and speaking; experimenting with new approaches for revision of writing and speaking; and conducting goal-setting conferences.

Assessment Up Front

When it was time for first-year students to write their personal narratives or for juniors to prepare for their persuasive speeches, we pulled sample papers and videos from some of our former students. These samples represented a wide range in terms of the standards that should be met. Pieces of writing were reproduced and given to students to analyze individually or in groups to determine what the writer did well and what the writer could do to improve. Much of this analysis was informed by discussions we had conducted about many of the personal narratives students had been reading as core literature in their units.
These analyses were shared with the entire class while the teacher recorded student comments on an overhead, on newsprint, or on a computer with LCD projection to an overhead screen. The recorded ideas served as the beginning of a personal narrative rubric that would be used to grade their papers. (See Appendix D for more on the strategy we titled Inductive Analysis of Quality Materials; the discussion includes a step-by-step description and a student worksheet.)

The same general process was used with formal speaking assignments after students watched video clips of the types of speeches they were going to be making. This approach to preparing for a piece of writing or a speech while teaching on the block went beyond having a new method to use during an extended class period. Students began writing their rough drafts with the rubric they had created close at hand, or at least fresh in their minds. The rubric was also helpful to parents and resource teachers who wanted to help their students. Even though these rubrics had the same components that teacher-created ones had always had, students took more ownership in their writing and had more confidence in their speaking when they helped generate the criteria. Eventually, as students began to understand the revision process, they began to use the grading criteria that had been established to guide Authors’ Circle and Speakers’ Circle comments and revisions.

Integration

Typically we began our units by “reading” the core “texts” (whether novels, short stories, plays, music, visual art, spoken-word audiotapes, or films or videotapes) before moving on to the writing and speaking requirements. When we had students open their folders containing all their work to date, hoping that they might discover ideas for written and spoken assessments, we found that most of the formal writing and speaking assessments were already started, because they connected to the materials that students had been reading and studying. As readers, they had written responses to the literature (Bookmarks, journal entries, Written Conversations, and Quote-Response sheets) and reflections on ideas that had come up in discussion. For example, two suggestions for research were made in the reading section of this chapter that could be used as a rough draft for a piece of writing or a speech. The mini-investigations suggested as a before-reading strategy and the inquiry board that was used for a mini-research-experience could be used as a pre-writing strategy for a formal piece of writing or an informative speech.

Many of the readings in our sophomore and junior curriculum elicited strong opinions from students on social issues and democracy.
Students often expressed these opinions in the various written formats suggested for during and after reading. Encouraging students to go back to these responses to literature and do further research on an issue or find alternate perspectives was another way in which reading, writing, and speaking were integrated as students took the ideas from reading to begin a persuasive essay or speech.

A Graphic Organizer for identifying character attributes after reading was also used as a way to begin a rough draft when students began writing their character sketches. Other Graphic Organizers—such as the T-Chart that was suggested for recording similarities and differences between pieces of literature, topics, or characters—were used to prepare a comparison/contrast paper.

Some schools are now working with essential questions at each grade level or in each course. Students could be required to answer one of these questions in an essay. The Quote-Response strategy suggested for use after students read a text and before entering discussion can be used as part of the process of writing a rough draft. If students have been previously instructed to choose quotes related to the unit question, essential questions, or a theme. In fact, this strategy is particularly useful because students have already pulled quotes from the text after their reading which can then become the supporting evidence in their essay. With the Quote-Response strategy, they had also written an explanation of how the quote related to the unit question, which further helped them with their expository essay. Our curriculum and assessments were even further integrated when we finally figured out that informative and persuasive speeches don’t need to be separate topics from the expository and persuasive essays and the research paper.

The biggest surprise to us was the degree to which the discussions we had incorporated into our reading instruction supported writing and formal speaking. When we thought of our own experiences, we realized it shouldn’t have been such a surprise. At the time, several of us were commuting to classes at Chicago-area universities. On one of the few occasions when we had to travel in separate cars, we realized that our car discussions after class were helping us put our ideas in concrete form before we put words on paper. We saw this happening in our sophomore English classes, too, when we asked students to bring in several of their favorite photographs to share with classmates as a community-building strategy that connected to a culture unit. Each day for the first week of class, students described one of their pictures to a partner, and the partner asked questions, which they took the time to answer. This telling and question answering guided their writing of rough
drafts, because they had already expressed the main points and had gotten feedback from an audience on what information was necessary for understanding and what was most interesting.

Clustering was another strategy that served effectively in various parts of the curriculum. We taught clustering to students from their first day in first-year English, where they interviewed a partner and then created a cluster or web by categorizing the main points and adding details that were discovered while talking to the other person. These clusters provided a way to hold onto ideas which students could then use to organize information for an informal or formal introduction or for a piece of writing that would be displayed on a bulletin board with individual pictures of students attached. As students continued to use clustering and other Graphic Organizers while reading, these too served as sources for their written work and speeches.

Revising Rough Drafts
Most English teachers are familiar with some form of peer sharing of writing to assist in the revision of rough drafts. But, as much as most of the teachers at Mundelein believed in peer feedback, we rarely felt that students benefited from the sharing time. Most of the time it seemed as if students were just going through the motions because they had to. It wasn’t uncommon for students to respond to the reading of a peer’s draft with, “It’s fine, you shouldn’t change a thing.” And, of course, with such “helpful” responses it was no wonder that the final draft wasn’t different from the rough draft—it was just neater. Discouraged, but still believing in the process, we looked at block scheduling as giving us the opportunity to teach the skills necessary to both provide effective feedback to other writers and use suggestions to improve written drafts. (A version of revising for speaking is described later.)

Once we went to block scheduling, we decided that the first piece of writing to be taken to final draft could go to an Authors’ Circle in which the entire class participated. In this way, we hoped to teach all students the skills needed to provide effective responses. Each author in the circle read his or her draft aloud while the other authors wrote questions about aspects of the writing that weren’t clear, that needed explanation, or that they were curious about. They also identified one aspect of the writing that they found particularly interesting or well done. A form for writing these types of responses was created to guide students in providing effective and appropriate feedback (see Appendix D).

Once the paper was read and classmates’ responses were written, students went around the circle stating what they liked about the
piece and asking one of their questions. Questions were answered by the author because of our discovery that verbal rehearsal helped students apply revisions to their rough draft. In this first all-class Authors’ Circle, students received as many questions as there were students in the class, unless of course some questions were shared among these people. If this was the case, the author had some important feedback to consider; it must be an important question to use for revision if more than one person had asked about the same thing. Once everyone had responded, forms were passed to the author, who would later use these when revising. In a class of twenty-five to thirty students, this process would obviously take several class periods, especially since a full ninety-minute class period couldn’t be devoted to this; other activities needed to be planned for variety.

Even though we as teachers were modeling the types of responses that were helpful for revision, there were some students who just “didn’t get it.” After the first day of sharing, we made photocopies or transparencies of various responses and analyzed these as a class so students could see the types of questions that helped writers revise. Students also analyzed the twenty-five or more responses they got from their classmates for the same purpose. Although a large chunk of instructional time was devoted to this strategy when we first introduced it, time was saved later in the term when students were able to work independently in small groups as they finished rough drafts.

Speakers’ Circle

The same process for revision was used with the formal speeches students wrote and presented, but this was more of a two-part process—one that addressed the content and, later, after students had taken the time to practice the speech, another that addressed their delivery. Many of us recalled the days in high school when we practiced our speeches by ourselves in front of our bathroom or dresser mirror, and we were hearing about some of our students doing the same. Just as many, if not more, of our students were hastily finishing their drafts minutes before stepping up to the podium. By highlighting the process that speakers use to prepare for a formal speech, we were able to create instructional strategies that made the process more visible for all students. The practicing and rehearsing to revise performances that used to go on “behind closed doors” became practices we made available in the classroom.

Another discovery we made when reflecting on our own process was that seldom in our professional lives did we speak alone—group presentations were more typical and visual aids were more common in
our presentations than were the formal, individual speeches we had given in high school and college. We asked friends and spouses in the business world if our conclusions were applicable to the world outside of education and found that there was more of a balance between formal individual and group presentations in most professions. We were told that most business presentations were heavily dependent on visuals—more so than what we had experienced. Our old curriculum didn't require any group presentations, so this was a change we made when we revised the curriculum for the block schedule. Of course, once we added group presentations, instruction changed, because students needed time to do the research, plan and organize the parts of the presentation, prepare visuals, and rehearse.

Sometimes students were grouped by topics chosen for the miniresearch-projects associated with their reading. Other times, we used a strategy called Jigsaw, in which groups read part of a core requirement and then presented it to the class. For example, in one class the teacher read aloud to the class several of the beginning chapters of The House on Mango Street (Cisneros 1984). Groups then chose two chapters each and created scripts from the vignettes to perform for the class. The experience with this book culminated with the teacher reading the final chapters aloud to the class.

Students in our classes particularly liked poetry studies where they chose a poet, time period, or theme to study and then presented dramatic interpretations along with analysis, visuals, and information on their topic. For example, in one English class a group of students chose to read poetry by E. E. Cummings and learn about his life, while another group decided after reading the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen to read more war poetry to determine common as well as conflicting messages that the poets were presenting. Still another group, influenced in part by some of the musicians they listened to, and to some extent by their parents' recollections, chose to look at the popular poets of the 1960s to discover the concerns of writers during this time of social upheaval. In their presentations, they made connections between the lyrics of the music they were familiar with and the poems they were reading.

Reflecting on Learning
Teachers often feel guilty that reflection—an important way of thinking about learning experiences in order to set goals for new skills to learn as well as to determine strategies that support the learning process—is typically shortchanged on the traditional schedule. The end of the class
period always seems to arrive before anyone realizes it, and there’s little or no time for reflection. When teachers begin to plan for new instructional methods on the block, they usually relax a bit about figuring out what to do for extended class periods when they realize that reflection can be built into the end of each class period and can become as common as taking attendance.

In our first weeks on the block, we encountered a few problems with reflection that were surprising but easy to solve by putting a few strategies into place. Our first surprise was that unless we had a specific approach to use for reflection built into our lessons, we ran out of time. We wondered if we had misplaced our blame when we had previously thought that the lack of active reflection in our classes was a time problem. We also discovered that reflection is a skill that needs to be taught to many students; it isn’t something that just happens. Our third discovery was that, aside from instructing students to write about what they were learning, or how they approached the reading, writing and speaking activities, we didn’t know how to help our students reflect.

A strategy that we easily connected to reflection was having students talk about their learning. We were in fact doing this ourselves when we read aloud to students and shared our pieces of writing as a way to model or teach our process, but we just hadn’t thought of having students do the same thing. Thus we realized that a variation of Say Something, where partners usually read and then stop to talk to a partner, could be used for reflecting on learning at the end of a task rather than at the end of the class period. Some teachers taught this skill by having tables of students share one new idea and/or one discovery about how they learned. Teachers can also jump-start students’ thinking by asking the class questions such as the following:

- How did this strategy (e.g., Quote-Response) work for you?
- What did you discover about the literature or your writing process that you might not have learned had you not used this strategy?
- What did the strategy cause you to do that you usually don’t do as a reader/writer/speaker?
- What did you like about it?
- What might have been difficult?
- Are there any other ways we might work with this strategy?
- Are there any other situations you can think of where you might use this strategy?
Hearing the responses of classmates to these questions, as well as the follow-up comments that teachers provided, helped students to understand reflection and its purpose. These reflection discussions also helped to improve the quality of the written reflections that had previously been our only strategy.

Using exit slips is a common strategy for written reflections. Index cards can be used to record questions on one side and discuss new ideas and/or process on the other. A variation of the exit slip is the strategy of Three Plusses and a Wish (Watson, Burke, and Harste 1989) where students record three positive aspects of class on that day or during that week, along with one wish that they have. Teachers can focus these comments or leave them open-ended depending on the purpose.

Many authors have included reflective questions in their journal articles and books, and these can be typed on a sheet of paper and distributed to students. We particularly liked Stephen Brookfield's (1995) questions and so we distributed a typed version of them which students kept in their notebooks for reference. (See the list of “Checking-In” Questions in Appendix D.)

We had been using portfolios as a strategy for reflection prior to block scheduling, but we had struggled with getting students to reflect over long periods of time unless opportunities were given for responses over shorter time periods (Porter and Cleland 1995). Mini-portfolio-conferences were a way to get students to reflect when they finished a novel, a piece of writing, or a speech. These documents and discussions focused on students examining their work to determine where they were before beginning the reading, writing, or speaking; how they got to where they were; and what they needed to do next. One of our purposes was for students to determine what their individual processes were so they could tap into what worked for them during future engagements with reading, writing, or speaking. We also wanted to help students determine what they might need to do next and how we might be able to help them in their future work—discovering what skills they were demonstrating in their work and what skills they need to develop next was a part of the informative feedback that we hoped to accomplish in these conferences. The conferences could be as simple as students organizing their work, considering the reflective questions, and then sitting down to talk with us while classmates were reading and/or using the computer lab. A given conference typically culminated with setting goals for the student’s next experiences (for more, see Goal-Setting Conferences in Appendix D).
What We Learned

- Since we found that reading and analyzing the core literature provided models for the types of writing that students would produce and helped them generate ideas for their writing, most of us were on similar schedules and needed the computer lab at the same time. In the past, on a traditional schedule, we had signed up for an entire period in the lab, and in our first term on the block we continued to reserve the computers in the same way. After our first experience of competing for the computer lab, however, we decided on thirty-minute time blocks for scheduling classes into the lab.

- Creating different rubrics with students for each of our classes seemed to take too much class time, especially when all of the rubrics ended up with the same criteria stated in different ways. However, we realized that this essential difference was what made the strategy work—it was the specific language that came from class discussions and found its way into the rubric that helped students to understand the characteristics of a high-quality piece and how they would be graded. After working with the strategy a few times, we discovered that once classes have created a rubric for speaking or writing, some characteristics could remain the same for future rubrics they create. For example, eye contact would always be a component of the effective delivery of a speech. When new rubrics need to be created for different forms of writing or speaking, the class can focus on specifics related to the type of work students will be creating for this particular project. Using the first rubric as a template for later rubrics saved us time and helped remind us of areas to consider in our next analysis of a type of speech or a piece of writing.

- Since our units were developed around inquiry questions and since we had selected core novels, we were able to some extent to predict questions that students would have, as well connections they might make. Providing the library and media services staff with copies of units and setting aside time for grade-level teachers to talk through the possible areas of investigation helped in ordering materials that would support the work students would be doing and in expanding print and nonprint collections.

- The value of videotaping student speeches quickly became apparent as a way to document growth over time and as a source for identifying strengths and goals that needed to be set. However, taping each student every time he or she spoke was complicated, until we developed a process that eventually involved students in taking more responsibility. When students entered their first year at MHS, they were required to bring in a blank
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videotape. (Our school didn’t want to increase the supply fee that students were charged at the beginning of the school year.) During their English class, each student labeled the tape with his or her name and year of graduation. Teachers collected all tapes and stored them in their rooms or offices for use throughout the year. Teachers also trained students to videotape speeches during class time. At the end of the school year, rooms were set aside for organizing tapes alphabetically by year for summer storage. The following school year, they were redistributed by the teacher and instructional aide in the Advancement Center (see Chapter 7), as the student workload was fairly light at the beginning of the year. When students gave their last speech during their senior year, the tape was theirs to keep.

Writing Process Resources


National Writing Project materials (see http://www.writingproject.org).


