# Our Histories: A Scaffolded Approach in Teaching Creative Nonfiction to English Learners

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## Introduction

My English learners often mistakenly say *history* for the word *story* in my sheltered English classroom. I frequently find myself correcting students and trying to explain that a story is different than history-- that history is a class, and a story is a text. However, upon deeper consideration, I find their "misuse" of the word *history* to discuss a text is rather accurate. Most stories are actually histories, and are frequently about the intersections of many histories. As people we are naturally drawn to histories: the ideas that changed history, the people who made history, and the relatives who influenced the history we ourselves are creating minute by minute.

In this unit, I will scaffold creative nonfiction writing* to English learners, or ELLs, in a sheltered English classroom. However, rather than ask students to write about people and concepts with whom they share very little connection, students will be asked to write about themselves, their communities, and the ideas that hold significance in relation to their past or present experiences. It is my hope that through this unit, students will come to value their *histories* as central to the teaching and learning cycle in which many students feel like distant observers. I intend to maximize the motivating nature of writing about oneself in order to scaffold increasingly more complex writing and subject matter as students develop the vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical knowledge to express their ideas clearly and confidently in English.

*Creative nonfiction is a genre that is defined by its similarity to fiction in describing real events. The distinguishing feature of creative nonfiction is the writer's ability to sequence real events with a style and tone that is pleasurable to read[1]. For the purposes of this unit, the type of writing students will read and produce will be referred to interchangeably as "informative" or "academic" writing. Secondary students in my school district are expected to perform several major types of writing, including argumentative, analytical, and what is referred to as "informative" writing on the curriculum map. Though these categories certainly do not encompass all of the writing that students produce, they do describe some of the major writing tasks used to assess student progress across the district. Furthermore, I often refer to the writing in this unit as "academic." The term is intended to distinguish the type of writing students will produce in class versus the type of writing they may produce for socializing. Research shows that social language develops more quickly and naturally than academic language;

therefore, it is essential to support academic language development through explicit teaching of the writing process, academic vocabulary, and rhetorical forms[2].

**Demographics**

The John Dickinson School is one of four public, secondary schools in the Red Clay Consolidated School District. Although the school is located on the suburban outskirts of Wilmington, Delaware, JDS serves a majority of students from inner city Wilmington and the immediate surroundings. The school houses two programs within its building: the Middle Years Program, grades 6 to 8, and the high school, grades 9 to 12.

JDS serves a diverse population of students. Approximately 26% of students are African American, 26% of students are Hispanic, and about 40% of students are Caucasian. Of the more than 800 students enrolled at JDS, nearly 300 students are classified as low income. Further, 11% of the student body are classified as English language learners and about 15% of students are learners with disabilities.

As one of two ELL teachers in a building that houses both a middle and high school, I am responsible for English learners from grades 6 to 12. However, the need for English language services in the high school dramatically outweighs the need for services in the middle school. Specifically, of the 108 ELL students currently enrolled at JDS, 99 of the students are enrolled in grades 9 through 12. Thus, this unit will focus on scaffolding academic writing to high school-aged students, though the activities can certainly be modified for a middle school context.

**Background Information**

Our district plans to implement a new approach to sheltered English instruction at the secondary level for the 2019-2020 school year. In years past, English learners were assigned to an English language class according to their English language proficiency. For example, all newcomer English learners, regardless of grade level, would take ELL1 for beginners. Students receiving this type of sheltered English instruction would be placed in two course sections in order to receive focused English instruction every day. The intention of this type of scheduling was to expose students to grade level curriculum goals, while also supporting their social and academic English language development throughout the year. While well-intentioned, this grouping of students made aligning grade level curriculum difficult for teachers of English learners. For example, ninth grade English learners would potentially miss exposure to ninth grade curriculum texts because the ELL instructor selected a tenth grade text to teach to a class comprised of mixed grade levels.

To address this issue, the district has mandated that English learners at the secondary level receive sheltered English instruction in grade-specific English classes. These

English classes will scaffold English learners of all proficiency levels, ranging from beginner to low intermediate, to achieve curriculum goals. While this arrangement solves the issue of grade-specific exposure to the language arts curriculum, it creates a need for frequent, meaningful differentiation.

It is with this notion in mind that I have developed a writing unit intended to support English learners spanning a wide range of proficiency levels. In addition to teaching my grade-specific English classes, I teach an English language development class for newcomers, and a mixed-grade writing course for English language learners at varying levels of English proficiency. I intend to teach this unit to my writing course for two reasons. First, this course allows me the curriculum flexibility to choose appropriate, high interest mentor texts and writing assignments. Additionally, the course provides the necessary time required to teaching writing skills deeply and meaningfully through modeling and scaffolding. Moreover, students who are enrolled in the course have been identified and selected to receive additional academic writing instruction. All ELL students are assessed by the state's annual language proficiency test, or the ACCESS test. ELL students who are not newcomers, but still lack a high level of writing proficiency (based on their ACCESS data) are placed in my writing course to receive targeted academic writing support.

## Rationale

### Issues in Teaching Academic Writing to ELLs

The task of teaching academic English to high school-aged English language learners is a complex challenge. These challenges are due in part to the nature of language acquisition, but they are further complicated by the reality of the American classroom.

Most researchers agree that the typical language learner acquires fluency in an additional language in about five to seven years. This general estimation does not account for students with exceptionalities or students who have poor literacy and language learning skills in their native language. Some English learners may acquire English in less than five years, or some learners may require several additional years to acquire fluency[3].

Language learning is generally broken into four domains: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Though language learning is not a linear process and the speed of acquisition varies among individuals, it is a generally accepted idea that writing is typically the last domain in which students will develop fluency[4]. Writing is the least natural form of communication, as it is typically done in isolation without any social cues or immediate feedback to correct language breakdowns. Therefore, an English learner may become a fluent listener and speaker of English in two years, but continue to face obstacles in literacy—most notably, academic writing.

What is particularly problematic for secondary level English learners is the expectation that students demonstrate some level of proficiency in academic writing across content areas. Not only do newcomer, high school-aged English learners have less time to acquire the language than the typical five to seven years, but these language learners are expected to write using academic English almost immediately after their arrival in order to participate and succeed in their content area classes. Requiring students to write about a subject that they may poorly understand in a written form that they understand even less will only prepare an English learner to fail.

Consider the following example: A ninth grade English learner who has been acquiring English for about six months is asked to write an opinion essay responding to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech. While this assignment may be perfectly reasonable for this student's native speaking peers, it is problematic for the English learner in several ways. First, many historical texts assume the reader has some understanding of previous cultural and/or historical events that precede the topic described in the text. English learners are often immigrants and thus, have little to no background knowledge of U.S. history and American culture. Second, the cognitive load of reading a grade-level text in English significantly impedes the English learner's ability to comprehend the text and gain the insight required to write an opinion responding to the author's ideas. Third, the English learner is required to respond in a form that requires language functions and a skill set that is wholly different than the text they have just spent a good deal of time trying to navigate and comprehend. Even with the support from an ELL teacher, it is nearly impossible to address the student's understanding of the content, grammar, vocabulary, and structure in both written forms given the time constraints of the school day and the pace of content area class.

The example of the newcomer 9th grade ELL student demonstrates what many language learners are faced with daily in schools across the U.S.-- nearly inaccessible assignments that lead to frustration, poor self-concept, and limited learning of content. While I am not advocating for entirely sheltered English language development for English learners, I do believe it is important to note the cognitive demands, complexity, and layers of obstacles that language learners encounter when tasked with academic writing. Moreover, I am not proposing that English learners should not participate in academic writing; on the contrary, I believe that English learners should have access to grade-level content and should learn the same academic writing skills as their native-speaking peers. However, this example not only demonstrates the need for appropriate differentiation in content area classrooms, but also shows the tremendous gap that English learners must attempt to bridge between classroom expectations and their immediate skill set in the target language. Therefore, it is critical that English learners receive targeted, rich academic writing practice as their repertoire and command of both social and academic English grows.

## Solutions in Teaching Academic Writing to ELLs

One way to support an ELL student's development as a writer is to scaffold highly contextualized, motivating writing projects that require students to demonstrate newly learned language and writing techniques. Before designing these writing projects, it is important to consider the following factors that affect student interest in literacy-related activities: student voice and choice, student connection to their background or prior experiences, and student interaction with the text[5]. The most motivating writing projects center around subjects that students know best: themselves and their communities. Allowing students to read and produce texts that draw on their background knowledge creates buy-in and motivation, especially among reluctant readers and writers. Moreover, mentor texts that value students' experiences create a mirror in which they can begin to form ideas for their own writing. Additionally, student interaction with written texts is critical in deepening students' understanding of text construction and confidence in producing writing. When teaching a particular written form, students should participate in discovering how the author constructs the text. Students should then have adequate practice in reproducing a similar text before producing a text independently. While students should have several opportunities to create written products in a particular genre, the subject matter of each topic should vary adequately to accurately assess whether the student has mastered the form, not simply subject matter within the text. This interaction with the text deepens student understanding of how authors produce texts, and allows them to experiment with and imitate techniques in their own writing.

The creative nonfiction genre lends itself well to the motivating factors associated with successful literacy experiences. Within this genre, the student is put at the center of instruction as both subject and author. Students are not required to divorce their experiences from the texts they are expected to produce. Rather, the texts they produce are significantly influenced by their own voice, style, and creativity. Moreover, the genre provides space for students to convey social interactions and experiences in an academic register. Thus, I am able to teach the skills and language characteristic of academic writing in a highly engaging format that naturally builds on student interest and prior knowledge. By providing rich opportunities for students to engage in this genre, I am hopeful that students will begin to approach texts in their content area classes as critical thinkers and confident authors who seek to engage and respond to a text, rather than wither in the shadow it's enormity.

**Objectives**

Of my three goals for this unit, my primary goal is to build student confidence and fluency in informative writing. Writing in a second language is a highly complex skill that takes years for most students to develop. Nonetheless, writing is a skill that is critical to learning and communicating in a 21st century learning environment. English learners who do not develop academic writing skills are put at a tremendous disadvantage in comparison to their peers. According to Avary Carhill-Poza, these students are faced with learning English in "a contracted time frame due to gatekeeping assessments that

may bar them from work opportunities and postsecondary education."[6] Building confidence incrementally is critical in supporting English learners' linguistic and academic development. In order for students to learn and apply language deeply, they must first feel confident that their attempts to produce writing will be met with some level of success. Thus, allowing students to explore rhetorical forms with familiar subjects (themselves or others close to them) will give students the assurance they need to write nonfiction about more complex subjects.

My unit will also aim to more fully incorporate listening and speaking to provide natural scaffolds to academic writing. As language learners become more proficient in English, I have found that my students have fewer opportunities to develop their listening and speaking skills. Typically, the focus of acquisition shifts to reading and writing once students develop a basic understanding of English. Moreover, this shift tends to separate academic writing from its true, communicative purpose, and leads students to view writing as mundane. What's more, as students develop listening and speaking English proficiency, it is assumed that they are capable of independent writing activities with little to no scaffolding or practice. However, according to the language learning theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), it is essential for students to have multiple interactions with a text as a class and/or with a student partner before they are expected to produce a text individually[7]. Rather than putting listening and speaking activities on the back burner, this unit will aim to incorporate focused interaction and negotiation of texts as a class, in small groups, and in pairs to scaffold writing exercises. Not only will students be discussing and analyzing texts as a class, they will be negotiating the techniques and language to write multiple texts in small groups and in pairs. In this way, students will develop fluency in all four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Lastly, my unit will aim to improve and strengthen the connection between students' backgrounds and their communities to my classroom and the school. My English learners are not only tasked with acquiescing to their new school environments, they are required to do so with limited knowledge of American culture and the English language. The years of American history and cultural knowledge that native speakers possess and use with such ease can leave an English learner feeling overwhelmed and isolated in the content classroom. Additionally, a great deal of texts in the content classroom are written from an American perspective and make references that assume the reader's linguistic, historical, and cultural knowledge. These texts may further isolate the English learner who is unable to see herself, her culture, or her community reflected in the text. In her study of sociocultural identity and second language learning, Natasha Lvovich describes how English learners are often in the "process of recreation, rather than readjustment [which] affects their language acquisition, as well as their entire academic performance."[8] Therefore, my unit aims to address this sense of isolation and distance by providing rich writing opportunities for English learners to put themselves, their cultures, and/or their communities at the center of the texts they produce. It is my hope that these learning

opportunities will help strengthen the school and community connection that is essential to fostering student investment in learning.

## Unit Overview

This unit will begin by attempting to engage my most reluctant writers while also modeling the strategies of effective readers and writers. I have found that most students who do not like to read do not like to write, and vice versa. This reluctance towards reading and writing is typically related to poor literacy skills. When I survey my students about their thoughts on writing, many students describe not knowing how to start or what to say about a topic. Additionally, students describe their frustration in not knowing how to organize their thoughts or knowledge about a particular topic.

To address these issues, I will create a predictable teaching and learning cycle that gradually releases the responsibility of independent production to students from the whole class instruction to small group work, and eventually to independent writing. Furthermore, I will consistently model and structure lessons around the writing process so that students can achieve writing goals frequently and incrementally. As the unit progresses, students will be required to read and write more complex texts. The activities of the unit are scaffolded in such a way that intends to segment writing lessons and assessments into comprehensible "chunks," while also stretching students' writing abilities with authentic and motivating writing tasks. Throughout the unit I will spiral "noticing" activities that require students to annotate and discuss text structure. For example, I will question students frequently about what the author is "doing" or writing about in a particular section of text. In this way, we will approach texts critically from an author's perspective. According to Kelly Gallagher, one of the keys to fostering lifelong writers is helping students expose the "real-world" reasons behind written texts. In other words, instructors help students to answer questions such as why do authors write, and how does writing help a person achieve his/her goals outside of the school context?[9]

To begin the unit, I will teach students how to write an informative text that requires minimal pre-teaching of content knowledge and maximizes attention to form: the "how-to" document. In this type of writing, the author explains a process step-by-step using straightforward verb phrases and minimal details. Because this form is accessible to most writers of varying proficiency levels, it allows me to model how I want students to begin approaching texts they are expected to analyze and to produce. I will draw students' attention to the format, grammar, and purpose of the how-to document by asking students to look for patterns or similarities they notice. As I guide student responses we will annotate model texts. The model, or mentor, texts will be comprised of outside resources, such as real obituaries from local or online newspapers, and jointly constructed texts that we have written as a class. These jointly constructed mentor texts are especially helpful as models for students when they begin to write in small groups or independently because the texts contain familiar content, concepts, and language. As I

move through the creative nonfiction unit, we will continue to analyze, annotate, and construct mentor texts frequently so that students have a better understanding of the writing craft and a useful way to analyze a text's structure.

Another advantage of beginning the unit with the how-to document is that it draws on students' background knowledge. Students are asked to create a how-to document on something they know how to do well. A great deal of academic writing reinforces what students do not know and values the knowledge of teachers and far removed experts. In his book on the role of creative nonfiction in the classroom, John O'Connor describes the teacher as the "lead role" in the dramatic production that is the classroom space. He writes that, "Students are often left to fill the non-speaking roles at worst, or the parts of secondary characters at best."[10] Throughout the unit, I will aim to scaffold personal writing to writing about ideas and others, and even the interaction between these topics. In this way, students will have the valuable experience of writing from different perspectives and for varied purposes across a range of text types.

In the second activity of my unit, students will produce obituaries on a range of topics from people to ideas. The obituary text is purposefully more complex than the how-to text so that students are appropriately challenged and introduced to new content. In addition to a review of the concepts learned in the first activity, students will learn techniques used to manipulate tone, as well as research and information-gathering techniques that will support student success in the third activity. The teaching and learning cycle will be similar to the first activity in which the burden of responsibility will be passed incrementally from the whole class, to small groups, to individual students as they construct their texts. Students will build on the "noticing" and annotating skills they acquired in the first activity. With the scaffold of an annotated mentor text and a collaborative text produced as a class, students will have more space to experiment with tone in the second writing assignment. In this writing assignment, students will use the obituary structure to explore humorous or sarcastic tones while writing about school policies, trends, or ideas that are "dead" to mainstream society.

Throughout the unit students will learn the basic principles of the writing process. A central part of academic writing is a high-level use of vocabulary and mastery of form. For each writing assignment, students will be required to conduct pre-writing, produce multiple drafts, and demonstrate proofreading and revision on their own writing and the writing of others. Similar to the increasing level of text complexity, I will increasingly demand more attention to grammar and vocabulary revision as students develop skills and confidence in their roles as authors.

In the third activity and culminating writing assignment, students will produce an informative personal essay. As intended, this essay will be the most complex assignment that students are required to produce. I will teach the essay's structure in a similar

fashion by gradually releasing responsibility of production; however, students will receive less and less scaffolding to assess the degree to which they have begun using the strategies of effective readers and writers. To successfully complete the personal essay, students will use the skills they have learned by producing a how-to document and an obituary. Not only will students be required to demonstrate research-gathering techniques and the proper citation of sources, they must also work through the writing process to produce a creative work of nonfiction about a subject that is personally important to them. Students will be challenged to manipulate narration and sequencing to convey a particular theme and tone in their essay. Additionally, students will fine-tune their descriptive writing skills, including the use of imagery, to write creatively about real events and facts related to their topics.

In addition to helping empower English learners as masterful authors, I want students to become critical readers and writers who apply their newly acquired skills to any text they come across. This is critical in fostering independent learners who can navigate literacy-related challenges across content areas. Upon the conclusion of the unit, it is my hope that students will use the skills they have learned to approach academic writing tasks with confidence and enthusiasm in their content classes.

## Concepts

### The Writing Process

The writing process is a central scaffold in teaching writing to English learners and native speaking students alike. Without proper modeling, the writing process can be more of a burden wrapped in an enigma, rather than a support for writing. However, when the process is appropriately modeled and spiraled throughout writing instruction, the writing process is essential in supporting both struggling and proficient writers as they develop their texts. According to Anthony Seow, teachers of writing must "teach students problem-solving skills connected with the writing process that will enable them to realize specific goals at each stage of the composing process."[11] The composing process is often described in four stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing, though I often refer to the editing stage as "finalizing." Though the final product of this process typically receives the most weight and attention, the process itself gives students a number of opportunities to experience successes as they move closer to achieving their goal-- a complete and polished text.

### Narration and Sequence

A great deal of academic writing relies on some type of narration and strategic sequencing of events. According to Pavlak, there are four basic genres for academic writing: storytelling, giving instructions, organizing information, and persuading.[12] While the unit touches on at least three of Pavlak's four genres, the storytelling genre is

featured more prominently in the mentor texts and the writing assignments students are expected to produce. This genre is especially beneficial for English learners because it is a scaffold between social and academic English, as it is one of the most natural forms of communication. The storytelling genre is the way we recount events, both important and forgettable, the way we connect with others, and the way we learn about and spread stories. Thus, this genre is a logical support for students as they begin to experiment with academic writing.

As the unit progresses, it is my intention that students come to understand the variety of techniques for sequencing ideas. For instance, a chronological progression of events is not always an effective way of organizing ideas, depending on what tone, style, and theme the author is attempting to create. In her writing unit for school children, Lucy Calkins describes the way in which students can make meaningful text by simply describing two or three "strong scenes."[13] Her work suggests that the goal of writing an impactful text is not to include every detail, but to strategically select and sequence details that will intentionally elicit reactions from the audience. Authors frequently make conscious decisions about the sequencing of events to intentionally reveal conflict, character flaws, or to create a particular mood. In this way, sequencing the events of a story can have a tremendous effect on the understanding gleaned by the reader. In this curriculum unit, students will notice and practice unique forms of storytelling and sequencing, and analyze the effect it has on the style of a selected text. Drawing student attention to narration and storytelling will further demonstrate the concept of author's purpose and the powerful techniques that are unique to the author's craft.

## Research and Information Gathering Techniques

A critical part of effective informative writing is an author's ability to gather and retell information in a way that is easy and pleasurable to follow. Students typically gather information from impersonal sources such as textbooks and the internet. The availability and ease of access to these sources is unparalleled in the 21st century. However, I have observed during my tenure as a classroom teacher that both native speakers and English learners struggle to navigate research materials. It is often difficult for students to distinguish and extract essential information from superfluous details. For English learners, the complicated jargon and complexity of texts on the internet and in textbooks can be overwhelming. This may result in the learner simply rote copying information of which they understand very little. This leads to even larger problems when the student is trying to retell the information as they construct their own texts.

Therefore, an essential piece of this unit will focus on information-gathering techniques. Throughout the course of the unit, students will complete activities in which they must practice skimming, scanning, and identifying the most crucial information as it relates to the topic of their text. Students will practice appropriate usage of quotations

and citing of sources, as well as paraphrasing and summarizing ideas from outside sources.

Description and Tone

At first mention of the nonfiction genre, a roomful of artists might sigh audibly and squirm uncomfortably in their seats. The nonfiction genre is known for its dry subjects, rigid forms, and general dullness (a stack of dusty encyclopedias always comes to my mind). Whether the typical characterization of the nonfiction genre is deserved or not, students are required to write texts within this genre frequently, making the form a necessary part of the teaching curriculum.

Much of the dread that surrounds nonfiction relates to description and tone. In the traditional sense, nonfiction texts are impersonal and concise, leaving the author with little room to create and manipulate "tone" (except, perhaps, monotone). However, with the advent of the "creative nonfiction genre," students are encouraged to focus specifically on description and tone. In John O'Connor's book *This Time It's Personal: Teaching Academic Writing through Creative Nonfiction* he describes how a student's perspective affects the content of what he or she writes and the tone of his or her writing-- in other words, "where we stand affects what we stand for." O'Connor makes this concept explicit to his students when he asks them to write a detailed "map" of their classroom and to focus on 10 objects. The objects that students choose to describe reveal a great deal about themselves.

While O'Connor's writing assignment may appear trivial to some, it is an excellent way to teach concrete noun phrases, imagery, and spatial order details, skills that are very much apart of the academic writing curriculum. Moreover, the assignment provides visual scaffolds and can be easily differentiated for learners of varying proficiency levels. These types of writing assignments will help me build student awareness that creative description and tone are not simply concepts limited to the fiction genre, but are powerful writing techniques that can be used effectively in nonfiction writing.

**Teaching Strategies**

Mentor Texts

In order to meet my primary goal for the unit, I will use mentor texts throughout the unit. Mentor texts are essential for teaching vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical patterns. Language learners must be given ample opportunities to explore, notice, and practice within the rhetorical structure that they will be asked to produce in written assessments. Mentor texts often teach meaningful content and serve as patterns for students to analyze and imitate in their own writing. Moreover, we will construct mentor

texts as a class that students can use as an additional resource to support their own writing.

### Writing Journals

Writing journals will serve as functional teaching and learning tools in several ways. For one, students will be able to record a majority of their classroom writing exercises in their journals so that they can mine their journal for ideas before a larger assessment. The journals will also function as a tool in which students can plan and organize information gathered from research. Furthermore, the journals are intended to serve as tangible evidence that students are in the process of developing into authors. With the journal in hand, students will begin to recognize themselves as writers engaged in a process, rather than passive students in a classroom.

### Modeling and the Gradual Release of Responsibility

The gradual release of responsibility model is a strategy that is essential to the teaching of writing. I am reluctant to assign any extensive individual writing without first modeling the writing as a whole class, and then providing ample opportunity for students to collaborate and experiment with the writing form. This type of collaboration is key in identifying any concepts that need re-teaching before students are expected to perform the task individually. Furthermore, the whole class and small group collaboration eases anxiety and builds confidence in reluctant writers. Additionally, the writing that is produced during whole class instruction and during small group work act as natural scaffolds and examples for students as they begin their individual assignments.

This teaching strategy serves another purpose that is specific to the language classroom because it follows a similar teaching/learning cycle as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL is a "sociocultural theory of language" that was developed by Michael Halliday as a way of teaching language and grammar in meaningful contexts. The theory purports that language tasks and genres require well-defined and specific forms necessary for effective communication. Similar to the gradual release of responsibility model, the SFL model suggests that instructors facilitate a negotiation, deconstruction, joint construction, and independent construction of classroom texts[14]. Each phase within this model prior to the independent construction requires interaction and gradually moves the burden of production from the whole class, to the small group, and finally, to the individual.

## Activities

### Activity 1: How-To Guide

The opening activity of any learning unit is a critical opportunity for fostering student motivation and engagement. Before diving into direct instruction, I begin my unit by

surveying students about their writing habits and what they view as their strengths and weaknesses as writers. In my sheltered English writing class I have a mixture of English language proficiency levels from beginning to intermediate. Moreover, these students express a wide range of self-concept in relation to their abilities as writers in English. Some students express confidence and eagerness to write, while others visibly shudder at the mere mention of the word "essay." In order to address the needs of this diverse class, I have chosen to begin my unit with the how-to guide.

The how-to guide serves several purposes. First, the accessibility of the text for reluctant and beginning-level English learners allows space to teach the writing process of drafting, revising, and finalizing a text. Second, the activity builds student confidence and writing fluency because the text requires relatively low cognitive demand, accesses students' funds of knowledge, and gives students an opportunity to show expertise. Third, the activity allows the instructor to scaffold and ease students into the routine of the gradual release of responsibility learning cycle. The text complexity of the how-to guide is basic and thus requires minimal pre-teaching. Therefore, the instructor can focus student attention on direct, whole group instruction before releasing responsibility to paired or small group work, and finally individual work. During whole group instruction, the instructor will model deconstruction and reconstruction of a how-to guide before students are asked to interact in small groups to construct a how-to guide. In the final phase of this activity, students will have learned the skills and text structure of a how-to guide well enough to construct a text independently using their own expertise on a particular subject.

Following a survey on writing habits and preferences, I present students with an overview of informative writing. In this overview, I make clear to students that an author's purpose in informative writing is to inform the reader. Then, I describe several types of informative writing: how-to, sequential, and explanatory. In an interactive presentation, students identify different informative text types and categorize them as how-to, sequential, and/or explanatory writing. For example, students might identify a picture of a YouTube tutorial as a tutorial and then classify it as how-to writing. This introduction to informative writing is intended to show students the clear purpose for this type of writing, as well as its many real-world applications.

When students have demonstrated a basic understanding of the types of informative writing, I tell students we will be constructing a how-to guide as a class. I ask students to take out their writing journals and take notes as we construct our how-to guides, as this class-constructed text with serve as their mentor texts for their own how-to guides. When students are ready, I take this opportunity in the lesson to capitalize on student interest by asking students what they know how to do well, and I make a list of topics on the board based on student suggestions. I may also contribute some humorous suggestions to the list to further engage students (i.e. how-to get a significant other in ten days, how-to take the best "selfie" for social media, etc.). I allow students to select the topic of the how-to

guide and we begin brainstorming the necessary steps as they relate to the topic. At this stage in the lesson, I ask students to notice how we prewrite our ideas before sequencing them, as well as the form of the phrases we are producing. With some strategic prompting, students are able to identify that all the phrases are short and clear, and all of the phrases begin with action verbs.

After our brainstorming session, I tell students that we are going to strategically sequence the steps of our how-to guide. In this part of the lesson, I model good writing strategies as I consider, negotiate, and determine the best organization of the steps we have written on the board. Furthermore, I eliminate, rewrite, or combine redundant steps that are not concise or are unrelated to our topic, all while "thinking out loud" with students. This type of modeling is critical to showing students the usefulness of the writing process and the decisions that good writers make to create a written product. While I am modeling this prewriting and drafting process, students are not only contributing to the process, they are also imitating it by taking notes in their writing journals.

In the final part of the direct instruction for this activity, I ask students to review the final version of our class's how-to guide to and to make observations about the text. Students should respond with observations they have made previously about the verb phrases and conciseness of each step in the guide. I may also ask guiding questions to elicit responses that point out the shortness of the guide, the sequencing of each step, and informative purpose of the text.

When I am confident that students have a firm understanding of the how-to text structure and purpose, I put students into pairs and ask them to produce a how-to guide on a particular topic. For example, if this activity is introduced at the beginning of the school year, I might require students to write a text that addresses how to pass my writing class. Students are given a course syllabus and must work in pairs to identify and negotiate what they think are the most essential steps necessary to pass my writing class. This activity serves several purposes. First, students are meaningfully engaging with an important text (my course syllabus) that they may otherwise lose in their book bag or discard in the trash on their way out of the classroom. Second, the activity is a pre-assessment of student's information-gathering skills, which will come into focus in a later part of the curriculum unit. Finally, this activity allows me to assess whether students understand and are able to craft the how-to text structure, and what skills or ideas I may need to reteach before students must produce a how-to text independently.

After monitoring and reviewing students' jointly-constructed how-to texts, I am able to assess whether or not students are ready to move forward in constructing a how-to text independently. When students are ready to write independently, I may have students interview each other about their background and talents. In this interview, students will ask each other about their interests, hobbies, and the way their friends or family would describe them to others. These questions are intended to help students think about their

skills and talents. Some students are shy or reluctant to admit they are skillful at something, so this activity serves as a form of prewriting to help students brainstorm ideas for their individual how-to guides. This activity also fosters student connections by helping students get to know one another. Additionally, this prewriting activity provides English learners with a rich speaking and listening opportunity.

Upon the conclusion of this prewriting interview, students will be asked to pick a topic for their individual how-to guide. Students are able to use the class-constructed and partner-constructed how-to guides as examples to support them as they write their individual texts. These texts support student independence by limiting the number of questions from students. As a result, I am better able to monitor student production and support students who need more one-on-one help as they craft their texts individually.

Because this activity is intended to familiarize students with both the writing process of drafting, revising, and finalizing written products, I will have students create infographics to present the final draft of their how-to texts. Students will use a free online infographic creator, such as the one at easel.ly.com[15], to showcase the final draft of their how-to text. This extension activity reiterates the final stage of the writing process and communicates that their written texts are meaningful products for an audience other than the instructor. Further, this presentation of their final products gives students an opportunity to demonstrate their creativity and style.

Students will be assessed on their final product using a rubric that scores their proficiency in the following areas on a scale of 1 to 4: content, structure, mechanics, and presentation. The area of content will measure how well students were able to select a topic and include instructions relevant to the topic. In the area of structure, students will be graded on their ability to sequence instructions logically and cohesively. The area of mechanics will assess spelling, grammar, and punctuation usage. Finally, the presentation area of assessment will measure student's ability to create a final product, or infographic, that is organized, concise, and aesthetically pleasing. Students will receive rubrics several days before their final products are due so that they know how they will be scored on their assessment.

Activity 2: Obituary

The obituary writing activity is intended to follow the how-to guide activity because it carefully builds on the skills and content that students learned by producing the how-to text. In this activity, I attempt to spiral the skills of drafting, revising, and finalizing a written product with the more complex obituary text. I will also approach the teaching of the obituary text through the framework of the gradual release of responsibility model. Further, I aim to introduce research and information-gathering techniques that will be reinforced in the final activity.

The obituary is an informative text within the creative nonfiction genre that lends itself well to teaching developing writers for several reasons. First, the obituary is a text that naturally peaks student curiosity because of its macabre nature and cultural uniqueness. Introducing this activity can, and should, lead to a guided class discussion about the way death is celebrated and viewed in different cultures. This discussion is intended to build background knowledge and student interest to facilitate student motivation. Second, the obituary has a well-defined, predictable structure that allows students to experiment with tone and style. By crafting careful descriptions that relate to the obituary subject, students can experiment with sarcasm, humor, and/or solemnness. Finally, the obituary text demonstrates the essence of creative nonfiction because it relies on carefully selected narration, sequencing, and descriptions of real events so that the text is not only accurate, but pleasurable to read.

Before I begin teaching this activity, I advise students that the activity deals with the subject of death, which some students may find disturbing or traumatic. Students are given the opportunity to complete an alternative assignment with the same learning focus if they are uncomfortable with the activity. This alternative learning assignment might be to write a profile of a family member or community member, or a short, informative report on a topic the student is interested in. I may have students complete a short warm-up or a quick write describing how death is viewed and celebrated in their cultures to give those students who feel uncomfortable an opportunity to approach me and obtain the alternative assignment.

When I am confident that students feel secure, I will briefly explain the meaning of the word obituary and show pictures of obituary examples. Then, I will ask students to share how their culture views and celebrates death. When all students have had an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, we will look at several obituary texts that I have selected from the internet or newspaper. Obituaries can be selected from local newspapers or online sources but should be vetted or modified for appropriateness. I will likely use one or two examples of obituaries with a humorous tone, such as the sarcastic obituary written for an Iowa man that was posted under the Lifestyle section of FoxNews.com.[16] These texts will serve as mentor texts and will have space in the margins for students to take notes on the rhetorical structure of the text. Moreover, each text will demonstrate a different tone and I will use strategic questions to help students identify how each author creates the tone of the text.

As students take notes in the margins of their mentor texts, I will display the mentor texts and my notes on the Smartboard. I will tell students that we will read each text twice. On the first read, we will notice and discuss the information the author includes in each paragraph. On the second read, we will discuss and determine the strategies each author uses to create tone. In this part of the activity, it is critical for me to model the reading strategies of a skilled reader. For example, after reading the first paragraph of an obituary, I might pose a question to the class about what information the author has

chosen to include. I will guide students' responses to notice how the author describes the subject's name, age, and day of death in the first paragraph. Then, I would write these notes in the margin of the text I have displayed on the Smartboard. After our first reading of the text, we will read the text a second time, determine the text's tone, and take note of the strategies the author used to create the tone (i.e. word choice, metaphor, exaggeration, etc.).

Following the guidelines of the gradual release of responsibility model, I will then lead the class in constructing an obituary that can serve as an additional mentor text for students. I will announce to the class that we will write an obituary for the "beloved" school uniform policy (the sarcasm is purposeful, and will serve as a playful use of tone). This topic is intended to engage students, model research and information-gathering techniques, and provide the space to play with writing techniques that demonstrate tone.

Before beginning our draft, I will ask students what information we need to write our obituary. If students are having difficulty answering this question, I will guide them to their notes and mentor texts. Once I have elicited appropriate responses, such as when the uniform policy was "born" (enacted), I will direct students to the school website to access the code of conduct handbook. During this part of the activity, I will model how I skim and scan the handbook for relevant headings related to our topic. Then, I will assist students in drawing relevant information from the handbook and paraphrasing or quoting the information to suit the needs of our text. Lastly, I will demonstrate appropriate citation of the source, which students will be expected to demonstrate in their own texts. While I realize that this particular text may not strictly adhere to the "nonfiction" elements of informative writing, the motivating nature of the subject and the opportunity to demonstrate manipulation of tone is well worth bending the rules.

As I lead the class in constructing our text eulogizing the school uniform, I will remind students to refer to their notes on the form of obituaries and strategies for creating tone. As I write our example, I will ask students what information I should organize in each paragraph based on their notes. Once we have the basic information to satisfy the form of our obituary, I will revise paragraphs and demonstrate how exaggerated and ironic details about the subject create a sarcastic tone. Ironic details such as, *The uniform policy will be sorely missed by all students,* illustrate how much most students do not like the school's uniform policy. During this part of the lesson, I am not only modeling techniques that I want students to imitate in their texts, but I am also modeling the writing process that students should implement when approaching any type of academic writing.

When we have completed the class-constructed obituary, I plan to pair students and tell them they will write an obituary for a popular trend that has "died," or gone out of style. Some examples of these trends might include fidget spinners, leggings, and Crocs shoes. I will encourage students to use creativity and to experiment with tone as they write their partner-constructed texts. Further, students must conduct some research and gather information about their topic, and cite their sources using the strategies that I

modeled during whole class text construction. In this phase of the lesson, students will have an opportunity to plan, discuss, and negotiate their writing with a partner before the burden of independent production. This provides students with an additional scaffold in building their skills to produce a similar text independently.

After I am able to review the completed partner texts and assess whether I need to reteach any part of the lesson, I will assign the independent writing assessment. In this assessment, students will purposefully select a tone and write an obituary for a person, idea, pet, or relationship that has passed away. Students are again encouraged to be creative in their writing, but to stay true to real events and facts. Though I aim for students to follow the form and use the relevant skills learned during direct instruction and paired work, I hope to spark students' authorial voice and style. This type of assessment is not simply intended to assess the degree to which a student can produce a specific type of document, it is intended to assess the degree to which students can plan, organize, and produce academic, informative writing that is personally important and wholly original.

Students will be assessed in a similar fashion to the way they were assessed on their how-to texts. Students will receive a rubric several days before their final obituary is due so that they can review the necessary elements to earn a proficient score. In the category of content, students must demonstrate a specific tone and relevant details that describe a well-defined subject in a manner that follows the unique form of an obituary. Second, to show proficiency in the area of structure, the written product must show a clear, logical sequencing of events that follow obituary form. Students will also be assessed on mechanics. In order to receive full credit in this area, students should have little to no grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors in their final document. Finally, students must type, title, and demonstrate proper citing of sources in their final products in order to receive full points in the area of presentation.

Activity: My _______ History

The final activity in this unit requires the most complex informative writing in which students will write a "history" of an object, symbol, or event that has had a significant impact on their lives. In this activity, students will continue to use the writing process to practice and strengthen previously learned skills, including narration and sequencing, description and tone, and research techniques. Moreover, students will expand their depth of knowledge and mastery of these skills in this final activity.

To begin this activity, I will ask students to complete a quick write in their writing journals in which they describe an object in the classroom in great detail. Then, I will encourage students to share their writing so that the class can provide feedback. During and after this share-out, I plan to ask guiding questions to help students make appropriate inferences about the author based on the object he or she chose to write about. For example, it could be inferred that a student who chooses to write about the dusty bilingual

dictionary on the bookshelf may be learning English as an additional language. During this share-out I will ask students to consider how the objects and ideas that author's choose to describe may be related to that author's unique perspective. With this framework in mind, I will tell students that their final text will be a creative nonfiction essay that is personally important to them. In preparation for this essay, students will practice using narration, description, and sequencing to effectively convey tone and theme in their essays.

In order to strengthen students' descriptive writing skills, I will teach a mini-lesson that defines imagery and gives students ample practice in identifying imagery in writing. Further, students will give vocabulary presentations on sensory adjectives and take notes on these adjectives in their writing journals to build their repertoire and understanding of precise, sensory images in descriptive writing. Students will continue to practice descriptive writing exercises in their writing journals in the classes leading up to the final essay. These exercises might include guessing classroom objects based on descriptive prompts, describing a photograph using sensory details, and creating a t-chart of sensory adjectives and nouns to create descriptive noun phrases.

In the days leading up to the final essay assessment, students will look specifically at the way narration and sequencing of events affects the tone and theme of a text. To do this, we will read an informative mentor text about a particular symbol, its history, and its connection to our world. The text that I plan to read and annotate with my students is about the American service flag and can be found for free at Commonlit.org, along with a collection of informative essays about a broad range of topics.[17] As we read our mentor text, we will take notes in the margin of the text to detail what information the author describes in each paragraph, and what literary techniques the author uses to convey that information. Some of these annotations will likely point to when the author is describing the symbol's history, when the author is aesthetically describing the symbol, and when the author is making human connections to the symbol. After reading and annotating our mentor text, students will refer to their newly annotated texts as I lead a discussion that encourages students to notice the creative nonfiction elements of the text. Through modeling and strategic questioning, I intend to guide students in noticing how the author uses a nonlinear sequence of events, personal connections, and careful third person narration to convey the theme to readers. Further, I will ask students to identify the author's use of descriptive writing and what effect this has on the text's tone.

As in the previous activities, I will model the prewriting and essay construction with the whole class before releasing responsibility to small groups of students. I may demonstrate a concept map that describes my values and interests to model the way in which an author narrows down topic ideas before writing. Then, I would likely spiral the information-gathering techniques that students learned in the previous lesson to show students how to conduct effective research and cite sources. In the final phase of the whole-class modeling, I will write (and revise) an essay that describes an object or idea

with which I have a personal connection. The personal nature of this type of text limits what students can contribute to the text, so I may write the text outside of class and simply have students read and annotate the text.

With two mentor texts in hand, students will be paired and prompted to research and write an essay about a popular international symbol. Though students may not be able to express a personal connection to the symbol they choose, the assignment is a necessary phase of negotiation and practice with the essay form that students need before producing a text independently. During the production of these texts, I will be specifically assessing student understanding of narration and sequence of information about the topic. I will frequently check in with students to question them about what tone they are attempting to create in the essay, and what theme they want to convey to readers about their topic. For example, students writing about the international symbol for peace may want to convey a theme that addresses the frequent use of the symbol in popular culture and society's ignorance of the symbol's historical significance. Furthermore, the partner writing exercise will give students an additional opportunity to practice information-gathering and citation skills.

After reviewing partner essays on popular symbols I will be able to assess if students are ready to complete their individual essays, or if I need to reteach particular skill. When I am satisfied that students are prepared to write their essays independently, I will ask students to research and write an informative essay about a symbol, idea, or event that is personally important to them. I will monitor students as they conduct their prewriting, drafting, and revising of their essays before assessing the degree to which students were able to perform the writing task. I will assess students by using a rubric that students will have several days to review before their final draft is due. The rubric will again assess students on the content, organization, mechanics, and presentation of their essay, a system that students should be accustomed to at this stage in the unit. Students who demonstrate proficiency in the area of content will write texts with a clear topic that has been well-researched and described. Further, descriptions of the topic should intentionally create a particular tone and convey an overall theme. In order for students to show proficiency in the area of organization, their essay should demonstrate control over narration and sequence of information as it relates to the topic. Student decisions regarding the organization of his or her information should also support the text's theme. An essay that earns a proficient score in the area of mechanics will have little to no grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors. Finally, the essay must be typed, titled, with proper citation of sources for students to receive a proficient score in the presentation category.

The culminating activity of writing an informative, personal essay will be a hard-won achievement for most, if not all, of my English learner students. To show my gratitude and excitement that students have successfully completed this unit, I will likely facilitate a "writer's cafe" that honors their hard work. I plan to purchase some sort of treats for

students to enjoy as they each read the class an original text that they authored during the unit. In this way, I hope to foster an environment that values learning, hard work, and mutual respect for one another as scholars and authors. Lastly, I am hopeful that the knowledge and skills students learned during this unit will endure so that they may continue to write their brilliant and bold "histories" as they unfold.

## Appendix A: Implementing District Standards

The standards I will address in this unit will include standards from the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium and the English Language Arts Common Core. I will target the WIDA English Language Development standard 2, which states that English language learners communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Language Arts. Further, this unit will target CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2, which states that students will be able to write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. Moreover, this unit will target CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W9-10.5, which states that students will be able to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audiences.

Notes

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