

Reading the Text by Writing

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When teachers require students to read works that may require them to encounter characters, settings, and plots that seem alien and even remote to them, how can teachers engage them with those texts in order to promote comprehension? Designing activities that involve teamwork, authentic writing, and creativity increases interest and, thus, comprehension and analysis.

When students have begun reading a novel, short story, or drama, one effective way to engage them with the material is to have them create character posters on poster-size chart paper with one character's name on each poster. Students may work in pairs to add color or illustrations to the name chart. Then, still in pairs, students can discuss the assigned characters and use small post-its to generate adjectives, gerunds, phrases, or quotes and even symbols that describe the character. By working together and discussing the material, students are generating original ideas and conceptions about the material being read. When these new learnings are discussed in class, everyone's comprehension, attitude, knowledge increases. After students have completed this activity, all members of the class may walk around to view the posters and comments.

Students may add additional descriptors/comments like a carousel activity as they review all of the posters. This activity continues to add to the knowledge of the characters. For instance, in *All My Sons*, one student's adamant assertion was that Ann was "nasty" because she wanted to marry Chris, her assumed dead fiancée's brother. He added that word to the chart about Ann. When I asked him to explain his use of the word to describe her, it became apparent that brotherly romantic interests may have disrupted part of his life. He did explain his reasoning clearly enough so that, although not everyone agreed, they did understand. Such discussion deepens the perceptions and understanding of all learners. Several kinds of activities may ensue. After the initial carousel, a full class discussion will create new perspectives and insights. For instance, students reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller created charts for Scout, Jem, Atticus, Bob Ewell, Tom Robinson, Calpurnia, Boo Radley, and others from *Mockingbird* and Joe, Mother, Ann, George, Larry, etc. from *Sons*. After the carousel, they wrote some kind of communication such as letters or notes from one character to another. As they worked in pairs, they discussed the voice of the particular character with whom they were working. For example, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, if Boo were writing, he might use invented spelling or picture writing. Calpurnia might misspell words on a note left for the children. Ann might write a letter of apology to Kate in *All My Sons*. To write authentic notes, students must know the text, the character, and

discuss their understandings with their partners. They may write the notes or letters individually or in pairs. Students turned in their writings for credit. Then students answered the writing as the character who received the communication. These were also credited and then the written products letters, notes, other documents were posted on that character's poster. Now students had created resources for the work they were reading. Discussions of the kind of writing each character would do allow students to pursue motives and character development deeply. Other activities include diamante poems for any two characters. Students joined Atticus Finch and Bob Ewell in To Kill a Mockingbird.

Bob Ewell Name of character
Mean, drunk 2 adjectives describing him
Drinking, yelling, accusing. 3 gerunds
Sot, abuser, crusader, father 1st 2 nouns describe top character and last 2 the 2nd character
Arguing, defending, questioning
Kind, intelligent
Atticus Finch

This format is called a diamante. The format of it can be changed to a single character or two completely different ones. These can be illustrated and then displayed in class as resources.

After the work had been read, students now had plenty of resources for a written composition. I use compare/contrast frequently because students enjoy finding similarities between characters that are seemingly opposite. Recursive drafts of individual comparison/contrast essays were much more easily and willingly completed after the engagement with authentic

and creative writing resources accompanied by thoughtful discussions.

This kind of assignment can be used with non-fiction as well. In science, if students are reading about the twelve subatomic particles, six uncharged ones called leptons and six charged ones called quarks and the five bosons that have force, all of which have been observed except the Higgs, they might create charts for each of the particles and their characteristics.

Then they could have each particle write to another, respond to that writing, write diamantes or other kinds of poetry about them and conclude with some sort of recursive writing that compares/contrasts two of these particles or explains how they work, etc. Whatever writing they do about them will solidify and strengthen their comprehension and scientific understanding.

Whatever the age of the students, they become more actively engaged with their reading, learning, and comprehension as teachers design strategies and activities that employ their analysis and creativity. As teachers begin to employ these kinds of activities, classroom time will produce more learning and comprehension.