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Improving Writing Skills in an American History Classroom

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Introduction including rationale

I have a student who comes in early every morning because she takes the city bus to school. This morning as we stapled handouts for class she asked, “Why don’t we ever do anything fun in social studies?” I didn’t tell her to move to the desk near the mouse hole and asked her instead, “What do you mean?”

“Well, last year we made these awesome posters all the time, and cut up magazines, and made presentations. Can’t we do that?”

“I’m trying to get you ready for high school.” I was thinking fast now, “I’m supposed to go over hundreds of years of American history before June and teach you how to take notes and outline chapters and write a decent essay and practice the CAPT.”

“It’s mad boring.”

I looked around my classroom later that day; it’s full of student work -- posters, charts, projects, Civil War folders, and student drawn maps of all sorts. It doesn’t look boring to me. A math classroom might look dull to me, but not history. As I looked more closely though, I didn’t see any essays. I had told Denise I was teaching the class to write essays, yet I didn’t see any examples on display in the room. There is not one single essay stapled to the door or stuck to the long back wall or taped to the area below the chalkboard.

I wasn’t worried about a ‘boring’ classroom anymore; I was wondering why although I gave essay assignments, I wasn’t displaying any finished writing samples. And then I knew the answer. I wasn’t pasting essays up around the room because the writing that the students produced didn’t match their ability, and I didn’t want to expose them. I realized that I didn’t want to expose my teaching either -- I wasn’t helping them become good writers.

All year long the students work on expository and persuasive writing -- write a letter to President Jefferson about the Louisiana Purchase, send a message to your frontier sister about your journey across America on the train, summarize some of the values of the North and South before the Civil War. The lined paper is

handed out and the rubric is written on the board. “Look for details, use your notes, add your own thoughts and conclusions, stretch and stretch your thinking to relate past to present -- take a critical stance.” I urge the students to write something fantastic, but fantastic writing doesn’t happen.

The intentions are good (mine and theirs), the students work for fifty minutes (they watch the clock), the paragraphs are handed in. I glance at a few opening sentences and wonder, “what grade am I teaching and where did I go wrong?” My 8 th graders cannot write a paragraph, let alone an essay, that addresses a theme or supports a point of view. And yet in great contrast, during class discussions, the students show wit and wisdom and an ability to play with the facts and make connections. Somewhere between speaking and writing down the ideas, their thinking gets strangled. Responses become generalizations (“The president did a good job.”), pat answers (“It’s interesting.” “I like it.”), or constricted (“My first reason is…my second reason is…”) Other projects on display around the room show their flare for the creative and their understanding of the material. Shouldn’t their essays reflect the same?

The unit **Improving Writing Skills in an American History Classroom** addresses this phenomenon of students choking up when faced with writing assignments that require them to develop a point of view. Students become motivated to express their ideas if they are interested in the material -- I have not yet met an 8 th grader who didn’t want to argue about some idea in history -- and so this unit will channel those debated if not debatable topics into writing assignments. In addition to working on writing with a theme in mind and a point of view, the students will practice creating good topic sentences, detailed paragraphs, and strong conclusions. Students also will review grammar, parts of speech and sentence structure using sentence diagramming. The unit, although adaptable to any historical period, incorporates social studies content beginning with the Louisiana Purchase and ending with the settlement of the frontier just prior to the Gold Rush in 1848. Internet resources, including specific web sites related to our themes and a class web page will be used, as will tools such as word processing, Inspiration® software and PowerPoint®.

Components of the Unit

Using informational text

Solving the problem, how to make the students become better writers and find a voice of their own, must be connected with the district’s charge to cover a huge amount of American history in an exploratory form between September and June. Whatever I do to improve writing must include content from American history; but fortunately, history provides vocabulary, themes, topics, and relevance for spurring student ideas. The content can produce issues for debate and argument (should Jefferson have bought Louisiana); the students can agree or disagree with ‘great decisions’ (Is the Monroe Doctrine really a great idea); or rationales for slogans and ideas (Manifest Destiny and Remember the Alamo); or perhaps students can ponder the “what would have happened if” questions -- if we’d lost the revolution, if the South had won at Gettysburg, if Kennedy hadn’t died? Students might even see a connection between something from the past and their present circumstances: “freedom of speech” wasn’t invented yesterday, and “bombs bursting in air” actually makes sense if you know about the War of 1812. I don’t think I am alone in thinking that content-based material (i.e. informational material) can actually be interesting to young adolescents.

What is the research? Informational text in a broad sense includes charts, graphs, photographs and diagrams

as well as nonfiction material and textbooks (Hoyt, 121). These are the stuff that history classes are made of. “The fact that middle school readers enjoy nonfiction books has been documented in studies for years…it is still one of the best kept secrets in education.” (Carter, 314) Middle school readers do enjoy nonfiction. I remember a day in the early part of the year when the class was reading a chapter on education in the early colonies (Globe-Fearon, 138). During the reading, we paused and talked about some of the main ideas: creation of public schools in Massachusetts, the spread of ‘dame schools’ for girls, and the publication of The *New England Primer.* Students wanted to read more of *The New England Primer* verses (“In Adam’s fall, we sinned all. Thy life to mend this book attend ”) and asked to print out a longer version from the Internet.1 Students also wanted to finish the textbook chapter before the class period ended because a portrait of an unfamiliar gentleman on the last page (The *Great Awakening* preacher Jonathan Edwards) looked so stern and grim that they wanted to know “who is that man” and “what is his problem?” I have no doubt that writing can be taught through social studies -- students are engaged in the material.

Addressing the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT)

Insofar as I have created my niche -- that social studies and writing can be linked -- I must deal with another district requirement: the CAPT.2

To increase the stress level for teachers and students alike (and even for administrators who perhaps worry the most), in the 10th grade, the students, along with every other 10th grader in the state of Connecticut, will take the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT). The CAPT is a state mandated high school assessment for academic achievement in mathematics, science, literature and interdisciplinary writing. Passing the CAPT in all areas will be a requirement for high school graduation beginning with the testing of the 2006 graduating class during their sophomore year. But preparing for the CAPT, just like drilling students for mastery level scores on the CMT (The Connecticut Mastery Tests), falls on the shoulders of all teachers, even back to kindergarten teachers whose students begin the journey to think critically -- as much as six year olds can think critically -- and make connections in studying their neighborhoods and families in the “All About Me” curriculum.

The Social Studies curriculum in the 8th grade is equally connected with the interdisciplinary test of the CAPT albeit on a higher level than captioning pictures students have drawn of the family dog.

Writing, at each K--8 level, is a key ingredient. “The most effective preparation for this test is to design and align curriculum to meet the demands of the test and to integrate the strategies into daily practice” (CAPT Handbook, vii). The strategies help students to use critical thinking skills as well as text analysis, reader response, and expository, narrative, and persuasive writing techniques. Students, as we know from our kindergarteners and my 8th graders, can begin to practice these skills long before the high school teachers hand them their practice booklets. Certainly by the 8th grade, students should be writing narrative and expository paragraphs and essays. At this point however, my students aren’t accustomed to writing about an historical idea or a theme in a cogent paragraph, nor are they even remotely ready to write several paragraphs in a three page CAPT essay of the same style. I might as well ask them to drive my car around the block. They’d crash because they don’t know what they’re doing.

I want my 8th grade students to be successful in high school. When they come back to visit -- and they do -- I want to hear that they are doing just fine. ‘Just fine’ should mean that students aren’t overwhelmed by high school and that they have shown their teachers that they know how to write what they think and think carefully about what they write.

Integrating technology into the classroom

Technology looms large. I am fortunate to have a classroom with six computers, a printer and scanner and a T1 line for a reliable Internet connection (as long as the main office isn't uploading attendance records to the downtown database.) I have been personally interested in computers and have been playing with them from the Kaypro days (this is the early 1980's before Bill Gates). In other words, I enjoy exploring technology and its uses and I keep pushing the hardware and software into the classroom (and into my dining room where the computer and all of its fallout spreads everywhere).

Computers are a great motivator. Suggest to a student sprawled on his elbow tapping a pencil that he can work on his paragraph at the computer, and he'll fly by with book in hand to the bright blue screen. In a classroom with six computers, like mine, it is possible to rotate the students at the computers with a learning center approach -- like moving a team through the batting roster. Short of staying after school, or sending kids off to the library or to the computer lab to type (not something teachers really want to do -- send students off on missions throughout the building), the learning center plan gets everyone in front of the computer -- eventually. Eventually, because if your classroom has twenty-six students, it will take five class sessions to complete one rotation. But the system still works. Students won't be printing out anything 'final' from their first visit to the computer station -- but they will have a draft to work on while at their desks for the next few days.

Once these logistics are conquered -- the computer groups are identified, the tasks charted, the directions and schedule for the week clearly posted -- you are free to integrate a variety of software tools or Internet and CD resources into the lesson. I encourage students to use Inspiration® software when they are brainstorming ideas or webbing a first draft.3 PowerPoint® is a creative way for students to work on topic sentences, vocabulary, organizing ideas: students have so much fun pulling the slides together that they forget it's 'class work'. Word processing is a standard now in many classrooms -- we use Microsoft Word® -- most teachers will acknowledge that students like to type at the computer and see their words becoming 'nice looking' text. The spelling and grammar checks relieve anxiety, much as calculators save (or prevent) students from learning multiplication tables in math.

For the teacher on the 'cutting edge', which is a misnomer really since teachers are always on the front line -- of discipline, of management, of teaching strategies, of good lessons -- the classroom web page4 is an easy way to use technology to carve out teaching time for students who need direct attention. The simply designed yet clear web page can step in to provide the essential but seemingly endless 'question answering' that students require and put the onus of finding out what to do squarely back in the hands of the student, albeit at the keyboard. I preview websites and post URLs on our web page whenever we embark on a new research project. I upload worksheets and directions for assignments so that students can print out papers when they lose them, and we all know they will. Not many parents in our school have access to the Internet, but in the future, and for those who do have computer connections, parents can check in to see what's going on in social studies.

All the web sites used in this unit are referenced in the notes. Web sites come and go and so I have included the date on which I accessed the sites. If the sites are no longer available, type in a keyword in any good search engine and you should be able to find another site that serves the same purpose.

Modifications for learning levels

When I was a student teacher years ago, I worked in a middle-school inclusion classroom (a classroom where

students with IEP's -- Individualized Education Programs -- are part of the regular classroom setting.) I was mentored by the head inclusion teacher who worked (she worked and I watched every move) in the classroom with a team that also included a paraprofessional. I learned from this wonderful and gifted teacher that any lesson that is modified to elicit 'success' and understanding from a student, is a modification that almost every student can benefit from. I write my lessons with her advice in mind -- and regard 'modifying lessons' as equivalent to 'developing a successful lesson' for all students.

Adjustments for student levels also happen in the amount of work required or in my assessment of each student's accomplishments based on expectations. Students often have the option to work with partners on a more challenging assignment. I use rubrics and performance tasks in assessments and evaluations so that students will have clear expectations of what is required and will have a chance to show their understanding of new material through practice rather than through memory recall oriented testing.

Objectives and Strategies

Pre-writing objectives

These objectives present the basic skills that I teach in social studies. Pre-writing could also mean objectives for reading in the content area since reading and writing go hand in hand.

Students will connect prior knowledge to informational texts.

We read together from the Social Studies text or from selected outside readings (including cartoons from the period and short biographies of relevant individuals) that I copy and print for the students. We always talk about what we read paragraph by paragraph and try to connect the information with something familiar from the students' lives or something happening currently in the news or society.

Students will predict outcomes based on reading of informational texts

Probably my most repeated phrase, in one form or another, is "What do you think will happen next?" Because history is a story, students can come up with many possible 'endings' to an event we've been reading about. We gather the possibilities, and then read the appropriate text looking for the answer. Students pay attention and sometimes high five each other if they predicted the outcome!

Students will acquire new vocabulary

Hearkening back to my daughter's second grade experience, I have borrowed the idea to have students keep a stenographer's notebook, alphabetized with tabs, for vocabulary. Students add new words -- with correct spelling and definitions -- as they wish. Social studies is filled with new and interesting words: students pick up their notebooks when they enter class and file them in the bin when they leave. Words are added every day. These word lists will be useful resources when students begin to write.

Students will identify main ideas and details and take effective notes

I once attended a workshop on reading strategies and was introduced to the beauty of two-column notes. Sometimes called split-column notes, this format helps students organize notes into main ideas and details, causes and effects, or key terms and definitions. Draw a line or fold the paper in half vertically, put the heading at the top of each column, and work through the text with the students until they can tackle this style

of note taking on their own. Review student notes in class -- sometimes the differences in what students identify as important enriches the note taking for the entire group and opens up some great discussions.

I begin the year working with students to identify main ideas and details -- there can be more than one detail for any paragraph. Students learn to look for key ideas (sometimes clearly the topic sentences) and restate this information in their own words for the notes. Open-note tests (essay format) motivate students to do a good job -- which means writing clearly and gathering enough correct information for the notes to be useful.

Expository writing objectives

These objectives represent a shift from what I have been doing previously in my classes to lessons that integrate instruction in writing. I will pay more attention to the elements of an expository essay and use informational text and primary sources as models.

Students will identify and write effective topic sentences

Searching for main ideas and topic sentences in two-column notes leads into modeling these source sentences for topic sentences in a student's own writing. Good topic sentences that the classes have identified will be posted around the room as guides; there are several worksheets commercially available to use as drills -- students selecting the best topic sentences -- or even better, students can develop their own worksheets and exchange them, or I can develop topic sentence drills from the current history topic and ask students to select the best sentence and explain why.

I will point out the elements of a good topic sentence regularly as we read -- we come across both good and bad examples in our social studies text. Students will 'rewrite' topic sentences using their two-column notes; students can practice sentence construction with a DO-NOW activity when they first enter the classroom -- I will post a subject-related topic on the board for a 3 minute quick--write; the class can share some of the sentences.

Students will identify and write effective conclusions

Good conclusions are difficult to develop -- luckily the textbook we use in New Haven (Globe-Fearon) ends each chapter with a concluding paragraph that serves as a good model of a conclusion. As a class we will 'dissect' these conclusions to identify what the writers did. We will also look at conclusions in other texts such as speeches -- the *Gettysburg Address* comes to mind.

Students will incorporate supporting evidence into written arguments

The groundwork for learning how to gather details has been laid with the two-column notes. When we practice writing paragraphs on a particular topic, students can use their notes as guides. It should help to motivate students to include enough details in their notes if I remind them, "You MUST use four facts from your notes in your paragraphs!" The difficulty then arises in motivating students to connect a position -- an opinion or an interpretation -- with their facts so that they can prove the point.

In beginning this kind of writing, the *Three Little Pigs* will come in handy (or any familiar story). We will write a class paragraph on why the last brother pig was the wisest of them all -- the students know the facts and we can pull it all together to prove a point. Because this is 8th grade (and so silly that the middle-schoolers don't want to be caught here for long) the practice should move quickly and students will be happy (relieved) to

sink their teeth into a better topic. Convincing our principal to hold a school dance should produce lists of supporting evidence that we can pick from to work into a detailed paragraph. Next step? Shifting to a topic in history.

Students will develop essential questions

Essential questions are also called guiding questions and usually when restated, become thesis statements. Student essays often ramble, like shoppers at a flea market, picking up items here and setting them down over there. Their paragraphs have no thread to tie them together -- no reason to be out there shopping on a Saturday morning -- no theme that makes good sense of all the facts.

Working on finding a theme, an essential question, will be much easier if I've been asking these kinds of questions throughout the year. Instead of, "Did the colonists oppose British taxation without representation?" (Which begs for a yes or no answer happily given by most students), I need to remember to ask, "How does the phrase 'no taxation without representation' show the colonist's opposition to the British?" I try to avoid yes or no response questions, and questions that require list-like answers (name Columbus' three ships). Questions that require students to 'create' answers out of facts and supported opinions ("Why do you think Columbus asked Isabella and Ferdinand to pay for three ships instead of two for his voyage?") always produce a response that shows some thinking.

Students will take a critical stance on an essential question

Whether the guiding question comes from me or is developed by the student about a particular topic, the answer must show some original thinking based on facts. A critical stance implies a weighted consideration of the answer. (At the flea market it means avoiding impulse buying: what's good about the brass lamp with the bird finial? What are its drawbacks? Does the floor lamp really go well with everything else in my purple bedroom? Can I afford it and fit it into my parent's car? Will my parents even let me put it into their car?)

Like the quick purchase, a weak essay doesn't show that the writer has thought about what he wants to say for very long. Teaching students to take the extra minutes to map out a response -- perhaps web their ideas or at least jot down notes -- will help them see the essay, like the lamp, in a larger context, and respond to it more critically.

Students will develop ideas in a written text in a logical order

An outline, a web, a timeline or a fact line, topics and subtopics, Inspiration or PowerPoint -- I will require students to map out their essay before they grab the pencil, erasable pen, or computer keyboard. The organizational drafts students develop will be handed in along with writing assignments.

Students will incorporate new vocabulary into their writing

Students can use their vocabulary notebooks whenever they write; the classroom has a thesaurus, as do the computers. For each essay or writing task I will identify -- on a secret list to be revealed at the conclusion of the assignment -- a few bonus words drawn from our week's reading or discussion, and any student who uses the words in the writing activity will receive extra points or some sort of prize. (This idea is reminiscent of Pee Wee Herman's "Word of the Day" on his old Saturday morning show -- Pee Wee would scream and yell and

blow whistles every time someone said the special word.)

Students will edit and revise their writing

Sometimes the students peer edit; also, students will hand in first drafts of longer assignments that can always be rewritten; shorter writing pieces will be graded and corrected. (I.e., the grammar and spelling mistakes are highlighted but not corrected: students who find and correct the errors and return the assignment can raise a grade.)

I think I will return to an older grading format I once used that gave separate content grades and grammar grades. Students' ideas can get full credit even if their grammar needs improvement.

Students will use parts of speech correctly

I am not a language arts teacher but I want to teach my students to diagram sentences. There are some excellent web sites that review the old technique -- the same rules apply as Sister Miriam taught me in 7th grade English many years ago.5 In social studies I will develop sentences that review something the class is studying, and students can diagram them as a DO NOW activity. We will review the answers going over parts of speech as well as content. For example, "The self-educated (*adjectives*) Andrew Jackson (*proper noun*) courageously (*adverb*) led (*verb*) the rag-tag (*adjective*) army (*object-noun*) into (*preposition*) the murky (*adjectives*) swamps (*noun*) of the bayous (*prepositional phrase*)."

Students will share their writing with a peer audience

Students will peer edit; students will read their essays to the class; essays will be posted around the room, and some essays will be reprinted in our monthly newsletter and/or posted on the class web page.

Students will use a rubric to evaluate their work

Students will use a rubric for longer projects. They will receive a 'working copy' that serves as a guide for the assignment itself. I break the tasks into smaller chunks and assign a point value -- usually 1 to 10 points. Students can 'grade' themselves on each portion and total all the elements for a final sum that can be translated into a letter grade.

American History content objectives

The following are the content and skill objectives for the period of American History covered in the unit.

Students will understand the importance of presidential decisions in American History

Students will read about and discuss the decisions of Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and Andrew Jackson.

Students will compare and contrast opposing viewpoints

Students will analyze the opposing attitudes towards the War of 1812; the rationale for and criticism of the Trail of Tears; the impact of westward expansion on settlers and on Native Americans.

Students will connect American society in the 21st century with influences from the past

Students will understand that our present political system with stronger political parties, nominating conventions, and concern for extending the right to vote to more Americans grew out of Jacksonian Democracy.

Students will identify key terms, persons and ideas in American History during the period of nation formation after the American Revolution

Students will study new vocabulary, new concepts (nationalism, isolationism, progress, Manifest Destiny, the frontier), as well as learn about the people involved in these events.

Information Literacy objectives

Because the students will be using software programs and the Internet during the unit, I have included Information Literacy objectives.

Students will use Internet research strategies to acquire supporting evidence for their writing

Students will use Inspiration® software to develop webs and other graphic organizers for their writing

Students will use PowerPoint® to illustrate main ideas

Students will use word processing software to create a final draft of a written work

District Standards

The unit is aligned with the following Social Studies and Language Arts standards developed by the New Haven Public Schools for the 8th Grade.

Language Arts

Content Standard 1.1: Reading: Students will demonstrate strategic reading skills before, during and after reading.

Content Standard 1.1. 20 Reading: Students will identify the main idea and theme of a work, including key events and details.

Content Standard 2.1 Writing: Students will demonstrate strategic writing skills before, during and after writing.

Social Studies

Content Standard 1.0 Diversity: Students will investigate the changing role of the United States in world affairs through significant historical periods.

Content Standard 2.0 Civics: Students will describe nationalism versus states rights.

Content Standard 3.0 Geography: Students will investigate the westward expansion.

Content Standard 5.0 Geography: Students will describe the settlements of the western frontier.

The Unit in the Classroom

“Just a quick review -- we’ve seen how the new country needed to develop a stronger government in 1781, right?”

“And what was the first attempt at government that was adopted by the 13 states?”

“Yes good, but these Articles of Confederation didn’t last long. Why did the Founding Fathers want to replace this first plan of government?”

We review what we’ve been learning, just so we all start this new historical period with the same ideas in mind. We are beginning a new unit on the growth of the United States after the American Revolution. We have just finished studying the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In 1787, the same year that the Constitution was written, the one-state one-vote Congress of the Articles of Confederation, passed the Northwest Ordinance. The unit begins with this territorial plan that explains how the northwestern lands that were won from the British -- lands stretching from the Ohio River to the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River -- would be governed.

Connecting one unit to another is important. I mimic the way that great ‘chapter books’ entice the reader from one chapter to another -- and if you want to know how he escaped from the magic mountain you’ll need to read the next chapter! (I think of *Uncle Wiggly* stories or the Chinese masterpiece *Monkey6).*

The connection between these units is the concept *plan of government* -- and its importance -- for a new country, for territories, for the school you are in, for a club you might join. We reminisce about discussions the class has already had about how a society achieves order. (The top class at this point can think about ideas from Golding’s *Lord of the Flies,* which they have been reading in language arts.)

Before we begin to read the first chapter in the unit -- The Growth of America as a New Nation -- and now about fifteen minutes into the lesson, I ask the students to write a sentence about why they would move from one city to another or why do they think the early settlers would have moved from one place to another -- out to the territories, to unfamiliar places? Volunteers read their sentences and I write them on the board -- I am lucky to have two long chalkboards resurfaced just last year.

We are going to learn how to diagram sentences -- *their* sentences that they have just written in this case -- and we will continue to use diagramming for DO-NOW activities for the rest of the unit. In this lesson today, we also talk about reasons for traveling west, for moving house and home, for relocating from one way of life to another. We will be ready to read about Westward Expansion tomorrow and we’ll be ready to try diagramming a simple sentence independently too.

For the next lesson we will read the Westward Expansion chapter and pull out topic sentences to diagram

together. We will talk about how to identify a topic sentence and we will rewrite and diagram topic sentences from the textbook. If we encounter good vocabulary words we will define them and add them to our vocabulary notebooks. Aside from writing skills, the main content ideas to remember about the chapter are the reasons for expanding westward, the impact on local peoples (tribes) and the "how-to' of getting there -- the National Road and turnpikes and the Erie Canal.

We will pay attention to good details in the next chapter by focusing on the Louisiana Purchase and the travels of Lewis and Clark. We will read from the Lewis and Clark journals and pull out some of the descriptions -- the journals are online so it's easy to send a group to the computer to gather descriptions -- we are looking for phrases that create images through good descriptions, and details that support a point of view. After students rotate through the computer assignment they will use the information they have gathered to write some detailed sentences about the Lewis and Clark journey. Other students will work on two-column notes for the chapter and another group will complete a mapping assignment: for this five day lesson we will rotate through the computer journals, write a description, work on maps, and spend two class periods reading the chapter and completing the two-column notes. We will wrap the week up on the following 6th day as a class and compare notes. The writing assignment and the notes themselves will be used as an assessment for the lesson and sentences will be displayed in the classroom.

So far in the unit we have worked on parts of speech, topic sentences, and details and description. We've used the learning center style for one week and we've been diagramming sentences almost every day. The next topic in the textbook is the War of 1812. We spend more time on description and detail by digressing from the textbook and taking a day to talk about the story of the *Star Spangled Banner* . We read the words for the first three stanzas and 'take apart' its meaning. "Through the night with a light from a bulb" is NOT a phrase from the national anthem -- I am amazed at what other strange phrases the students think are part of the anthem. We will review metaphors and similes, note how they can add to a writer's arsenal, and will finish by accessing an Internet site to play the music and sing the first part of the anthem together.7

Back to the War of 1812 and we work on causes and effects with our notes -- and try our hand at drawing conclusions. If the British continually impress men from your merchant ships into their navy what do you think might happen? Why did Andrew Jackson's popularity increase during this war? After answering questions such as these in sentences, and comparing them, we try to pull the chapter together around the theme that the textbook presented: that the War of 1812 is also called the Second War for American Independence. I ask the students to complete a conclusion for the chapter that sums up what we have been talking about. They are advised to include three important details from the chapter in their conclusion that help support the theme. It's almost a case of pretending they wrote the chapter themselves and now need to finish it with a conclusion. Students work on their paragraph as a two-day homework assignment.

Since homework was just mentioned, I'll explain that I try to give assignments four times a week and often on Fridays. The assignments are reviews or extensions of what we are doing in class or occasionally can be an independent project type of activity -- writing an essay or making a poster or a diagram. For practicing topic sentences and good conclusions, the students will receive worksheets that ask them to distinguish between sentence examples where they will select good models from a list and explain their choices. Sometimes students will be asked to complete a topic or concluding sentence or to write sentences modeled after examples I have given them. They will need to refer to their textbooks to look for missing facts to add to some of the sentences so that the homework integrates the writing portion with a review of social studies content. Homework is checked off on a roster the day it is due so that students are motivated to hand it in on time -- especially because we often go over it in class.

The unit now moves into the 1820's and we discuss the concept of nationalism and link the discussion to the chapter topics: the Monroe Doctrine and the Marshall Court. Students will write a two-paragraph letter to Uncle Sam (whose picture appears in the chapter and whose origin and purpose we discuss). The purpose of the letter is to convince Uncle Sam that America is a patriotic country. Students are reminded to begin with a strong opening sentence and to tie up their thoughts with a good conclusion. Students work on a web or outline of their letter and begin a first draft. We will return to the computer rotations and on the second day a group will type at the computers. Students not at computers will work on their drafts and complete a reading guide that leads them through the next chapter -- the Influence of the West -- that explains Jacksonian Democracy and the Trail of Tears -- an interesting juxtaposition! I will send a reliable group of six students (with 3 ¼" disks) to the library media center to type up their letters so that the rotations this time only take three days.

All the letters will be done on the computer so that I can display some student work to the whole class through the multimedia projector. We'll gently critique what we read, and strongly praise good sentences, good usage and good ideas.

The unit began with the notion of traveling westward; we moved into nation building, and we will end the unit traveling westward again -- on the Oregon, Santa Fe, and Mormon Trails. We will concentrate on note-taking, gathering details, and understanding the concept of the 'frontier' to prepare students for the final performance task -- a longer essay on a topic of their choice (within limits) related to the significance of "crossing a frontier." We will use Inspiration® software displayed on the multimedia projector to web one of the chapters together. Some students will 'help out' at the computer when we do this and learn the program -- which is intuitive, fun, and very easy to learn -- I'd like students to use Inspiration® when they brainstorm and organize their projects. Students who like to think in a more linear fashion can use PowerPoint® to outline their essay.

The final performance task will be to write a five-paragraph (minimum) essay answering an essential question about a person who has 'crossed a frontier'. Students will need to research the accomplishments of the person they select, develop questions, take notes, and work out an essay answer that supports a personal view -- a critical stance.

They will hand in a first draft along with their notes, and have the opportunity to revise and rewrite.

Assessments

Our 8th Grade team (three homerooms) will be using a ring binder system with our students so that all work that is handed back to students must be filed and saved. In this way students are developing a portfolio that they can refer to throughout the year. Each marking period students empty the binder and save the papers in an accordion file. At the end of the year, students will have work to use for review for final exams as well as a picture of their growth while in the 8th grade.

All of the two-column notes, all writing assignments and any completed and corrected worksheets now become handy references (of model sentences, paragraphs, conclusions, parts of speech). This unit will be taught at the end of the 2nd marking period so that students will be able to compare their writing with their

efforts in the earlier part of the year. I think a portfolio system is actually the best way for a student to see how much he has accomplished (students are always impressed by an inch of completed paper organized in a binder). And if a student should read an early piece of writing and compare it to something that shows his improvement, the smile says it all.

Class work

Students will hand in their two-column notes and any webs or outlines they develop during the unit. The DO-NOW activities (diagrams of sentences or other short activities) will be collected randomly. The Letter to Uncle Sam will be assessed as will the final performance task on the frontier.

Homework

Homework is checked into a homework log regularly -- review at home of material covered in class is the focus so it is important that students work routinely (developing a good habit) on each homework assignment and bring it into class so we can go over the work or answer questions.

Rubrics and self-evaluation

I will develop multi-point rubrics for students to use to guide them through certain projects. There will be a rubric for the Uncle Sam letter and the Frontier project. Students will evaluate their own work and determine the points that they think they earned. By using the rubric, the students and I will evaluate separately the process as well as the final outcome (the essay or paragraph) of the assignment.

Activities in the Classroom

Activity one: Introduction to Diagramming sentences

Title : Diagramming Sentences

Grades: Grades 6-8

Essential Question : How can I review grammar *and* history by diagramming sentences?

Performance Task : Students will diagram sentences.

Standards : Writing 2.5 Students will check for correct grammar.

Students will use different types of sentences.

Objectives :

Students will review parts of speech.
Students will recognize and model simple sentences.

Students will review historical content by writing and analyzing sentences.

Materials : Chalkboard, erase board or overhead for class demonstrations; handouts

Schedule : One class period for initial explanation followed by homework and additional checking for understanding in subsequent classes since diagramming will become a daily DO-NOW activity.

Procedure : Following a short discussion of what it means to move to a new place, students will write a sentence expressing personal feelings about moving somewhere new OR they can write a sentence describing why they think a settler in the 1800's might have moved to a new unfamiliar land. Students will read their sentences and I will select and copy three of the sentences on the board. Sections of the board will be labeled verbs, nouns, adjectives. The class will dissect the sentences and make word lists from the sentences under the headings. I will ask students to think of other ways to dissect the parts of the sentences other than in lists.

After we've searched for other ideas for 'visualizing' a sentence. I will introduce diagramming sentences as another option for identifying all parts of speech in a sentence, asking students to name any other parts of speech that we didn't previously list. (Students might say adverb, preposition, or conjunction). Now I'll write a simple sentence -- S *ettlers move* . -- and show how to diagram it. Try another -- *Colonists rebel* . -- and then increase the difficulty by adding an object. *Settlers bought wagons.* The basic sentence is subject-verb-object.

I'll ask students where in the diagram they would put adjectives or adverbs. *Eager settlers quickly bought new wagons* . We listen to a few ideas before I show the class how to diagram with adjectives and adverbs. Turning to the examples copied on the board students are now asked to change the sentences out loud into a format that we will be able to diagram -- we diagram their suggestions talking about all the parts of speech. We also talk about the content of the sentences trying to understand all the reasons people cite for moving -- either to a new city nowadays -- or to the unexplored lands in the west in the 1800's.

I can ask students for some simple sentences to use for more practice: we'll write another three simple sentences on the board and students will try diagramming them independently or with partners, checking for understanding. Homework will be a practice diagramming worksheet of sentences related to the chapter on westward expansion. I'll let the students know that on the next day, they will learn to diagram more complex sentences.

Assessment: I will use independent work by students to check for understanding and will look over the diagramming homework sheets to evaluate student understanding.

Handouts : The student homework sheet will include examples of diagrammed sentences to use as models along with ten simple sentences for the students to diagram.

Activity two: Using new vocabulary in topic sentences

Title : What is an 'ism'?

Grades: Grades 7-8

Essential Question : How is Uncle Sam a symbol for nationalism and patriotism?

Performance Task : Students will write five topic sentences.

Standards : Writing 2.4 Student will include new vocabulary to expand own vocabulary when writing

Social Studies: Students will write short statements presenting historical ideas.

Objectives :

Students will understand simple definition of nationalism and patriotism.
Students will write topic sentences.
Students will understand Uncle Sam as a political symbol.

Materials : Chalkboard, erase board or overhead for class demonstrations; handouts

Schedule : One class period for initial explanation followed by homework

Procedure: The students will begin the lesson working with partners to figure out the meaning of some new words and to identify a person in a picture on a handout. I'll ask students for suggestions on how they can figure out the meaning of a word without using a dictionary? Responses will lead to a discussion of 'context clues' and relying on what a student already knows to perhaps figure out something unfamiliar.

Students receive the handout -- one per student -- and begin the activity with a partner. Students are asked to fill in a box of nine spaces with any words they can think of that end in the suffix 'ism'. After 5-10 minutes the students share their words and I'll write the suggestions on the board. Next we will define the words as a group -- not all words will be easily defined (Buddhism, mercantilism, baptism are just some examples of words students come up with along with racism, patriotism, Judaism.)

In preparing for this lesson, I've spent some time at a website (Saint-Andre) researching explanations for the meaning of an 'ism'. I have selected and simplified some definitions to develop two explanations that I think the class can understand: an 'ism' can be understood as a basic principle, belief or idea on which actions or other beliefs are based; an 'ism' can be understood as a "movement" based on an organized point of view undertaken by a group of people working toward a common goal.8

The class works through the words on the board, modifying the first definitions, trying to understand what these two definitions really mean when applied (as a suffix) to the root words. I'll save the discussion of nationalism and patriotism until the end.

Students are asked to work with partners to try to define nationalism and patriotism on their own. We'll look for the root words -- nation and patriot -- and then the students will have five minutes to decipher their meanings. The class shares their definitions and I'll ask a student to check and read aloud the dictionary definitions of each term -- then the students can modify or edit their definitions as necessary.

A picture of Uncle Sam is printed at the bottom of the handout. As a group we talk about the meaning of a symbol and give some examples -- the Nike symbol and flags always come up as examples. Students are asked if they recognize the cartoon gentleman and either identify him by name (silently on their papers) or make a guess about who he is (writing this guess down including why they made that particular guess.)

As a group we share our guesses and I'll write on the board the descriptions that the students used in their explanations: stern, old, strict, a leader, wearing the flag, looks like George Washington, wise. This symbol (of patriotism and nationalism) is now identified as Uncle Sam. Students are asked to complete the following sentence: "Uncle Sam looks like a good symbol for America because…" We share the sentences aloud, noting sentences with better details and use of any vocabulary we have been studying. Students get some new ideas from their peers and are now ready to complete the homework assignment, which is to complete five topic sentences about Uncle Sam. Students will receive a handout with five sentence starters.

Assessment: Student participation in class is noted and I will circulate around the room to check for understanding while students work with their partners. The worksheet from this class will be collected tomorrow with the homework sentences for evaluation.

Handouts: Handouts include the brainstorming worksheet with the picture of Uncle Sam and a homework sheet with the five sentence starters.

Activity three: Learning centers

Title: The Journals of Lewis and Clark

Grades : Grades 6-8

Essential Question : How can I integrate details from reading into my writing?

Performance Task : Students will write descriptive sentences for a newspaper entry.

Standards : Reading 1.2 Students will analyze and synthesize information to create new texts.

Social Studies: Students will gather data from primary sources.

Objectives :

Students will read excerpts from the *Journals of Lewis and Clark.*
Students will take effective notes.
Students will incorporate detail into descriptive sentences to support a theme.
Students will use the Internet to research a topic; students will multitask at the computer between a web site and a word processing file.

Materials : Chalkboard, erase board or overhead for class demonstrations; handouts, computer access to

Internet; word processor, printer, pre-designed online form (optional), transparencies of US expansion before and after Louisiana Purchase, large poster board mock-up of a newspaper with headline “Lewis and Clark brave hardship to uncover wonders in the Louisiana Territory.”

Schedule : The journal reading and writing activity includes two of five learning center activities for a five-day lesson. Students will research at the computer for one session; students will write descriptive sentences for one session. The other three sessions will be used for introducing the lesson, reading and taking notes on the chapter, and completing a map activity. On the last day students will write and copy one of their best sentences onto a card to be added to the newspaper mock-up and displayed.

Procedure: I’ll begin the lesson (hopefully on a rainy day so the room is dark) with a transparency showing the size of US after the American Revolution and I’ll ask the students to predict how they think the boundaries of the US, pointing to the wall map of North America, grew to their present size. (Did we fight a war? Make a purchase? Steal some land?) We’ll talk about the possibilities and then I’ll show a second transparency of the size of the US after 1803, noting that the American landscape has now doubled in size. We’ll read the few paragraphs in the text that explain the purchase (knowing that students will reread this selection when they take notes later in the week.)

I’ll ask the students to imagine that they had just purchased a brand new home, sight unseen. What would the next step be? What would they want to know about the house? Using student responses, we’ll discuss the reasons that Jefferson might have had for sending Lewis and Clark into the ‘unexplored’ Louisiana territory and beyond to the Pacific Coast.

I’ll explain the way the rotations work through the computer stations and how the independent tasks will be handled throughout the week-- all this information will be outlined on a large chart as well as printed out and placed in a clearly marked folder.

> Computers (one session): students will access a web site9, spend some time exploring the interactive portion of the sight and learning about Lewis and Clark. Students will open a Word template (a note-taking form) and will locate the Lewis and Clark Journals. Students will scan through the Journals -- with the theme in mind that Lewis and Clark endured hardships in order to make new discoveries -- and will select five excerpts (one paragraph each) to copy and paste into the Word template including the citation (date and source). These excerpts must contain details that students can use to support the theme. Students save the file on their floppy and print out a copy (printing two if students are working in pairs).
> Note-taking (two sessions): Students will develop two column notes of the textbook chapter on Louisiana Purchase and students will take guided notes on the excerpts they selected from the Journals. In this case, using words found in the excerpts, students will complete a chart of adjective-noun phrases (windy night, white gleaming catfish), verb-adverb phrases (courageously hunted, fearfully whined), and any special nouns, adjectives and verbs that increase the interest for the reader or are unfamiliar to the student. Students are now asked to summarize in a short phrase, five events that occurred in the excerpts that demonstrate or support the theme. (Lewis’s dog was attacked by a bear…The entire camp shared only two rabbits for food one night).

Map Work (one session): Using the laminated placemat maps available in the classroom (or a map in a textbook) students complete a worksheet that checks their understanding of the geographic references that relate to the Journey of Lewis and Clark. (Mississippi River, mountain chains, the trail to the Pacific, distances traveled and so on.)
Write/rewrite sentences (one session): Students gather their chapter notes, the map worksheet, and the excerpts from the Journals and the notes, and develop their own descriptive sentences to support the predetermined theme. Students should write two clusters of sentences (3 or 4 sentences each) that use details and information to elaborate and support the theme. The sentence clusters can focus on separate topics or the students can rewrite the first set of sentences in a new way. I will circulate and talk to students about grammar and style (editing) and will suggest ways to improve the sentence clusters. Students will select one set of sentences, edit and revise, and rewrite on a card to be displayed under our newspaper headline.

Assessment: I will use the final student selected sentence, the draft sentences, chapter notes, and the notes taken from the Journal excerpts as assessments. I will also evaluate the students' understanding of the writing process as I circulate around the room.

Handouts: I will develop the word template (an online form that can be filled in by the students) for the computer (or students can copy excerpts into a word file instead of using the template); I will prepare the map worksheet; and I will prepare homework sheets (vocabulary and sentence diagramming).

Print Resources

Beaman, Bruce. "Writing to Learn Social Studies." In *Roots in the Sawdust.* Ed. Ann Ruggles. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1985. Article focuses on integrating reading in the content area with writing strategies.

Carter, Betty, and Richard Abrahamsom. "Castles to Colin Powell: The Truth about Nonfiction." In *Into Focus -- Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers* . Eds. Kylene Beers and Barbara Samuels. Norwood, Massachusetts: Christopher Gordon Publishers, 1998. 313 -- 332.

Fiderer, Adele. *25 Mini-lessons for Teaching Writing* . New York: Scholastic/Professional Books. 1997. Although the teaching strategies focus on Grades 3-6, the ideas can be used and adapted for a higher grade. The section on organization stresses sentence and paragraph development with activities that break apart writing skills with practice lessons that can be modified for your own curriculum.

Hayes, Nan DeVincentis. *Grammar & Diagramming Sentences* : *Advanced Straight Forward English Series.* Liverpool: Garlic Press, 1997. Text guide for diagramming sentences.

Hoose, Phillip. We Were There Too: Young People in US History. Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2001. Stories about real children who experienced the historical events we will read about in class.

Hoyt, Linda. *Revisit, Reflect, Retell: Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension* . Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1999. Nice graphic organizers for pre and post reading.

Levadi, Barbara. *Writing to Explain* . New Jersey: Globe Fearon Educational Publisher, 1996. Step by step guide to planning, organizing, and editing reports, summaries, and directions and descriptions. Helps a social studies teacher understand elements of writing.

Lewis, Merewether, and William Clark. *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* . Ed. Bernard DeVoto. New York: Mariner Books, revised edition 1997. Inexpensive paperback edition of the journals.

McCarthy, Tara. *Expository Writing: Mini-lessons, Strategies, Activities* . New York: Scholastic/Professional Books, 1998. Activities include how to develop a purpose statement; how to use cause and effect and comparisons in expository writing; how to develop a main idea from definitions and explanations. Useful for brushing up quickly on language arts skills.

National Archives and Records Administration. *Teaching with Documents* . 2 vols. Washington, DC., 1976. Collection of 52 primary source documents spanning 200 years of American History with teaching suggestions.

Norris, Jill, and Don Robison. *Writing Fabulous Sentences and Paragraphs* . Monterey, California: Evan-Moor Educational Publishers, 1997. Filled with good ideas for helping students develop writing skills.

O'Connor, John R.. *Exploring American History* . Paramus, New Jersey: Globe-Fearon Book Company, 1994. This is the textbook we use; Globe-Fearon has just come out with a 2002 edition but the new edition eliminates the numbered paragraphs that we find so useful for note-taking.

Santa, Carol and Lynn Havens. *Project CRISS: Creating Independence Through Student Owned Strategies.* Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 1996. Chapters on formal and informal 'writing to learn' include strategies for note-taking, comprehension, and writing. This book is great for ideas on developing worksheets.

State of Connecticut Department of Education. *Connecticut Academic Performance Test -- Second Generation, Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines, 2001* . Connecticut State Board of Education, 2001. A useful handbook developed by the state with sample CAPT material and guidelines for teaching. Available online (PDF) and in paperback

Electronic Resources

Burns, Ken with PBS. *Lewis & Clark -- the Journey of the Corps of Discovery.* 1997. Florentine Films and WETA. 12 July 2002. http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/>. A very detailed website with footage from the PBS series and background matter.

Connecticut State Board of Education. *Language Arts Publications* . 2002. 10 June 2002. http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dtl/curriculum/currlang_publ_capt.htm>. This is the online handbook for the CAPT Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines. It can be printed out as a PDF.

Darling, Charles and Capital Community College. *The Grammar and Writing Guide* . 2002. 10 July 2002. http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>. A 'how to' guide for all sorts of grammar reviews including a detailed explanation with examples for diagramming sentences.

Goodrich, Judith. *Thinking History.* 2001. 15 July 2002. http://www.thinkhistory.homestead.com>. This is the web page I made to use

as a resource for students: it includes lists of websites by topic as well as worksheets for students available as PDF.

Inspiration Software, Inc. *Inspiration.* 2002. 8 June 2002. http://www.inspiration.com>. The official company web site for the software program I use for webbing and outlining. A free trial version is available for personal use.

Intel Corporation. *Seeing Reason: Mindful Mapping of Cause and Effect* . 2002. 11 July 2002. http://www97.intel.com/scripts-seeingreason/index.asp>. I teach cause and effect when we practice note taking. This site has a wonderful online activity for students that the teacher can tailor to her own curriculum -- it is an amazing teaching tool!

Johansen, Jay. *The New England Primer: Foreward and Technical Notes* . 1996. 14 July 2002. http://my.voyager.net/~jayjo/primerf.htm>. This is a great place to read up on the history of the Primer and to access more of the original material.

National Geographic. *Go Across America with Lewis and Clark* . 1997. 15 July 2002 http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/97/west/>. Great interactive adventure for students imagining they are traveling along with Lewis and Clark.

Saint-Andre, Peter. *The Ism Book: A Field Guide to the Nomenclature of Philosophy.* 2002. 10 July 2002. http://www.openthought.org/ismbook>. I used this site for ideas about the meaning of 'ism' and examples.

Towner, Eugene L. and Mary Ann Ayd. *Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine.* 1998. 13 July 2002. http://www.bcpl.net/~etowner/patriot.html>. This is a fun site for students to explore the history of the national anthem and music.

University of Virgina. *The Journals of Lewis and Clark Site.* 2002. 15 July 2002. http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JOURNALS/toc.html>. The journals are indexed by topic and hyperlinked making exploration easy for students.

Notes

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1 For the *New England Primer* , one good web site of many is http://my.voyager.net/~jayjo/primer.htm.

2 The *Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines* portion of the CAPT is best explained by the information listed at http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dtl/curriculum/currlang_publ_capt.htm that was developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education.

3 I was introduced to Inspiration® Version 6 at a computer workshop for teachers. The software allows students to brainstorm their ideas using a variety of graphic organizers. Students can also work in an outline format. There is a Kidspiration® program available from the same company that works well with lower elementary students. Check this resource out online at www.Inspiration.com and download a thirty-day trial copy.

4 The web page I use for social studies can be found at www.thinkhistory.homestead.com.

5 Aside from the book sources listed in the bibliography, one excellent web site for diagramming sentences, among many, is http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/diagrams/diagrams.stm

6 I am always looking for an opportunity to promote these two books as read-alouds for any age. The skill with which they lead from

one chapter into another truly influenced the methods I use to link units, lessons, topics and sometimes even paragraphs. Social studies lends itself naturally to this 'tell a story' approach. Howard R. Garris wrote the *Uncle Wiggly Stories* ; *Monkey* also called *Journey to the West* was written (in Chinese) by Wu Cheng-en and has been translated into a number of editions. The edition my family has always read is translated by Arthur Waley and was reissued in 1994 by Dover Press, titled *Monkey.*

7 The Fort McHenry National Museum in Baltimore -- the anthem was written during the British attack on this fort -- has developed a web site filled with information and activities for students at http://www.bcpl.net/~etowner/patriot.html; the specific page that plays the music and gives the stanzas can be found at http://www.bcpl.net/~etowner/anthem.html.

8 A wonderful web site all about 'ism' is http://www.openthought.org/ismbook. I used some ideas from this source for my simplified definitions.

9 I list three excellent web sites (all requiring Netscape 4.0 or higher). http://www.lewis-clark.org/choice.htm and http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/ These first web sites include the journals and make selection of excerpts quite easy for students. Students will be able to see copies of the original manuscripts as well. National Geographic's web site has developed a virtual adventure for kids as a member of the expedition at http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/97/west/.