



Ninth Grade English: Aims, Skills, and Procedures for Stretching a Student's Capacity to Think

Curriculum Unit 78.01.07
by Jeremiah Gadsden

For many of our students, failure comes because they do not learn the use of six tools: reading, writing, spelling, grammar, literature, and independent study. The ninth grade is the time when all students should set the foundations of a successful four years of high school. It is a year of review, repetition, and discovery. Most ninth-graders will tell you, "Oh, I had that before," which leaves you (the teacher) to describe the year's purpose as "reviewing and repeating until you really know it." It is not until midyear that most ninth-graders discover that they will have to work hard to stay in high school for a full four years. At midyear, most students will have received an "F" in one or more subjects, leaving them with only a half year to make up the difference. The pressure to succeed begins to mount up. A student fails a course if he receives an "F" for three or more marking periods in any one subject. By the time four years have passed, more than one third of the entering class will have flunked out or dropped out.

I suggest that we concentrate on teaching ninth-graders about the skills and disciplines they will need in order to succeed in high school. We need not spend much time on what the student thinks is boring, but his assignments should be varied as well as aimed at a common goal. He will need to recall all that he has learned in the past eight years in order to move from one skill to the next. In English, a ninth-grade student should be able to move from decoding words to reading with the ability to comprehend and transfer what has been read; to write creatively; and to write about things he has read. Following this process a student becomes able successfully to study high school English.

I will try to show a progression from one skill to the next. The decoding stage of high school English is a stage of intensive review, identification, and correction. It is here that we identify basic reading problems. Problems that may present themselves include problems of pronunciation, reversal of letters, spelling problems, and even lack of knowledge of the correct order of the English alphabet. One method I use to discover if the alphabet has been learned well is to assign three students at a time to a section of the blackboard, having them each race through the alphabet twice. The class decides which student's work was finished first and which work was neatest. I can usually identify pronunciation problems through assignments involving reading aloud.

The final element of decoding skills is teaching how to divide words into syllables. One reason why I stress breaking words into syllables is that it is a good tool for teaching poetry. Dividing words into their proper parts has helped my students to analyze poems and to understand the beat or rhythm of a line. More importantly,

this skill helps kids pronounce words correctly. Once the student has learned how to divide words into syllables and thereby gained confidence enough to attack longer words, the teacher can begin to show that words have jobs to do. Each word can do one of the eight different “jobs” of the parts of speech. While learning the parts of speech, students begin to see that the power of a word depends on what job it is performing. Is the word showing motion? Is it talked about? Is it helping to talk about something?

As student’s decoding skills improve, I expect more reading from them. One system I use to help teach students how to read is to have them examine the pattern of sentences and learn the four forms and the four functions of sentences. With a knowledge of the parts of speech, students can now be told that “any noun plus any verb equals a complete sentence.” My favorite example is found in the Bible in the Book of John: “Jesus wept.” From this type of simple sentence the teacher can proceed to explain the nature of the compound, complex, and complex/compound sentences. Special attention should be drawn to the terms “independent clause,” “dependent clause,” and “subordinate clause,” introduced with the explanation of the complex sentence. Students should be given many hours of practice in reading and producing such sentences. When these sentences are easily read and reproduced, the student is reading on a third-grade level. For many ninth-graders, that could mark at least a year’s growth in reading level.

Just like words, sentences serve special functions, which I call “the forms or functions of sentences.” These functions are declarative, interrogative, exclamatory, or imperative. Combining their knowledge of sentence types and functions, students are now ready to learn the functions of such complicated terms as “predicate complements,” “subject and verb agreement,” and “conjugation of verbs.” These bits of information must be introduced at just the right time so that the student can see a progression in his knowledge of high school English and the teacher can judge at what level the student is able to read. There are several ways of measuring when the right time comes. The simplest is to test the class on the skills they have been taught. If more than half of the class earns “C” or better, then it is time to move to the next skill. Otherwise, review the skill and retest with an unannounced quiz. Another is to canvass the other teachers of your students. Discuss what you are doing and have them watch to see if there are improvements in your students’ work because of a new skill they are using. Get a response for the majority of students. If the majority of responses are positive for those students, then it is time to move to the next skill.

Having done all of the above, the ninth-grader is ready to embark upon an experience in English literature. Now the student will read whatever material is available to the teacher, with special attention paid to what makes each genre what it is. Students must not only read; they must also write, particularly short stories, plays, and poems. In reading and writing literature, they will discover the special features of each form of writing. Reading and writing are ready to be taught simultaneously.

Teaching how to outline is probably the most effective way to get the student to recognize where a story is going. His reading skills begin to sharpen up as he becomes a “hunter” for the topic sentence. Likewise his writing skills are becoming keener as he learns how to use details in a story by seeing how professional writers use details. In developing an outline the student finds that the topic sentence, supported by its details, tells him what type of paragraph he is about to read or has read. It is here that teaching paragraph writing is emphasized. Essays of opinion or fact can be taught here. Literary criticism may easily be added to any of the lessons of this stage.

In conjunction with writing lessons, students should be reading as much as possible. The teacher can begin by assigning short stories which students would read, examine, and discuss. There should be several discussions of the short story in order to make clear its elements. Each student should write at least four or five short

stories. The progression should move through the year to the novel, play, and finally to poetry in the spring season. Each genre should be studied for a full marking period, so that there is a natural break in the progression.

Review and midyear exams should cover not only the present marking period's work, but also work that has been taught since the beginning of the year. Through this kind of review, students are able to unify the year's work. This unification helps to keep the learning process in progress.

Finally, independent study is a method of learning which best suits students who have acquired sixty percent of the skills I have listed. This process should begin with the student's deciding on a topic that interests him. He should then be allowed to come to the front of the class and have other students ask him questions about his topic; he will record each question in outline form. (I usually try to help out by taking some notes for the student who is going to do the research.) Later, he is to visit the school library and do research about the questions asked. On returning to class, the student makes an oral report, giving the answers he has found, and also telling which questions he has not been able to answer and will have to research further. New questions are asked after each oral report. Teacher and student must confer on ways to write up the report, so that the student learns the use of footnotes, bibliography, and research.

The final product of this process will be a student who will have at least seen and used six tools: reading, writing, spelling, grammar, literature, and independent study, all necessary for successful study of high school English.

The most important element of unification in this process is the teacher, who must be ready to answer questions from students at all levels. As soon as possible, I try to become a part of my class. At the same time I try to make each student a part of the class and a part of me. I find out where they are from. What do they like or hate? I try to mention well-known people who live in their community. I try to find out what some of their opinions are about their city, state, and world. I express a few of my own opinions. I give my intentions, desires, goals, and expectations as their teacher. I seek theirs. (Getting to know each other this way may take up to four weeks.) Finally, I try to enjoy the students. I spend a lot of energy bringing the individual and the group together. I try to find beauty or positive qualities in each of my students. A fat girl may have "cute cheeks." A boy with nappy hair may have a friendly smile. A loud kid could have the greatest penmanship. I try to comment on these things in positive ways. I try to be helpful, open-minded, adaptable, and most of all honest.

In summary, my goals and academic objectives for teaching the six tools ninth-graders should learn are as follows: In reading, with the aid of a reading specialist and/or a teacher's aide, and a strong emphasis on reading, students will increase their reading level by at least one year's growth. The Metropolitan Reading Test forms A and B will be used for evaluation. In writing, students will be able to write in clear paragraphs. They will be able to demonstrate good penmanship. In spelling, they will become aware of spelling problems and develop tools of attack for solving them. In grammar, students will become aware of the importance of grammar in verbal communication. They will be able to use proper grammar in simple paragraphs as well as in all types of sentences. They will know the four types and four functions of sentences. Students will know the functions of each of the eight parts of speech. They will learn the form of three types of paragraphs and proper use of the end punctuation marks. In Literature, students will learn the four literary genres and read examples of each: short stories, novels, poetry, and plays. There will be time allowed for writing in each genre except the novel. They will learn the elements of each genre—plot, setting, rhyme, stanza, etc. Finally, through independent study they will learn how to research a topic. Each student will report to class, write and

rewrite his work, experience public speaking, and learn how to ask questions, how to think, and how to conduct interviews.

What the Yale-New Haven Institute has helped me to do is to put down more clearly some of the procedures I have developed which I have used to help stretch my students' capacity to think. Most of what I had time to read concerned itself with very specialized techniques of teaching writing, and showed some of the pitfalls we teachers encounter. I find that a teacher can teach whatever he/she wants, as well as he/she wants to. The problem lies in being able to convey one's success to another in such a form that the process will be successful for any teacher.

What I have tried to create is a twofold process into which any content can be plugged. On the one hand, an English teacher of ninth-graders can fit his/her content into any stage of this process, that stage being determined by the student's needs and abilities. On the other hand, I am trying to subtly impress upon the ninth-grader a system he can use to study anything from literature to mechanics. What the student does by this process is to break down a subject and put it back together, thus acquiring a fuller understanding and feeling for that subject. This is exactly what happens in the independent study process. Questions are asked, breaking down a topic, and an essay is written from research on the questions, thus putting back the "broken" parts. If we can enlarge the student's capacity to think, then we can teach him almost anything.

The following is a calendar suggesting some aims, skills, and procedures for enlarging the student's capacity to think. Our school year is divided into quarters. Each quarter is made up of about two months, excluding vacations and holidays. We call our quarters "marking periods":

First Marking Period

Aim Recognizing words and realizing their power.

Skill Reading.

Lessons

- I. Pronunciation of words on any freshman list.
- II. Dividing some of the listed words into syllables.
- III. Introduce prefix, suffix, and root (to show meaning changes and word development).
- IV. Introduce parts of speech, explaining the functions of all eight.
- V. Begin lessons on sentence structure.
 - A. Introduce types and functions of sentences.
- VI. Begin reading short stories.
 - A. Use sample sentences from reading to supplement lessons on sentence structure.
- VII. Using *Sprint*, *Scope Series*, give lessons on speed reading.
 - A. Introduce SQ3R: Skimming, reading, reviewing, and rereading.
- VIII. Give Metropolitan Reading Test.
- IX. Make up and give test of information retained from previous lessons.
- X. Introduce elements of literature.
 - A. Use lecture method to explain the elements.
 - B. Students copy notes from the board as teacher lectures.
- XI. Give short essay assignments.

A. Discuss short stories read in terms of the elements of literature, plot, setting, character, etc.

Second Marking Period

Aim Arranging information in clear orderly form.

Skill Writing.

Lessons

- I. Reviewing sentence structure.
- II. Introduce the art of outlining.
- III. Entire class jointly outlines details for a story about the class.
- IV. Using *Composition-Models and Exercises* , teach the types of paragraphs.
 - A. Assignments should be to reproduce such narrative, descriptive, and expository writing.
- V. Stress main idea or topic sentence and its possible location in a paragraph.
- VI. Begin reading a short novel.
- VII. Review elements of literature.
 - A. Make outlines for essays on points presented by the work or works being read.
 - B. Write essays on each work read.
 - C. Teacher lectures on work read; students take notes.
 - D. Give quizzes from lecture notes.
- VIII. Begin procedure for independent study.
 - A. Students choose topics.
 - B. Class gives questions to be researched.

- C. Students individually go to the library to find answers to questions asked.
- D. Using notes made from research, each student reports to class.
- IX. Give mid-year test of all skills and content covered thus far this year.

Third Marking Period

Aim Using skills learned to further understand English and to build upon that understanding.

Skill Creative writing.

Lessons

- I. Read/listen to selections from Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, William Shakespeare, Robert Frost, and Stevie Wonder.
- II. Introduce some elements of poetry.
 - A. Demonstrate their use by certain popular authors: Hughes, The Beatles, Marvin Gaye, etc.
- III. Students to write in rhyming couplets.
 - A. Make up cheers, songs, or jokes.
- IV. Do exercises in "Poetry Box."
 - A. Create and recite poems.
- V. Write short stories.
- VI. Introduce elements of drama.
- VII. Read short plays.
 - A. Dino.
 - B. *Scope Series* .

- VIII. Write short plays.
- IX. Write essays on plays read.
- X. Take a trip to a nearby theatrical performance.
- XI. Continue work on independent study projects.

Fourth Marking Period

Aim Produce a piece of work utilizing as many of the skills as are learned.

Skill Research, reading, writing, and speaking.

Lessons

- I. Individual conference with teacher on work done thus far on outside project.
- II. Oral reports to class on work done.
- III. Rewrite drafts of research.
- IV. Visit library twice weekly in order to complete research.
- V. Make up panels of speakers covering topics being worked on.
- VI. Produce final work.
- VII. Retake Metropolitan Reading Test.
- VIII. Review for final exam covering all content and skills learned.
- IX. Students help decide what goes on the final exam. X. Give final exam.

Materials

Books—Records—Filmstrips

Composition-Models and Exercises (Use lessons one through fifteen.)

Skills Box (Particularly good for emphasizing predicate complements and good lessons on understanding phrases and clauses.)

Poetry Box and *Collected Poems* by Langston Hughes (Good samples of many different types of poems.)

Reading Materials:

I. Short Stories

Striving (Fourteen stories including an excerpt from *Death Be Not Proud* .)

Getting It Together (Thirty stories grade levels one to five.)

A Piece of Steak (Includes a recording of each story.)

II. Novelettes

Brooklyn Story (Broken family brought together by tragedy.)

Bill Peckett (Black cowboy hero.)

Black Comanche Boy (Black boy raised by indians during slavery days.)

III. Novels

The Outsiders (Reading levels should be between 2.6 and 5.0.)

The Learning Tree (If the class' reading level is 5.4 and above this is an excellent book.)

IV. Plays

Teacher , Teacher and Other Plays)

Dino and Other Plays) Both collections are easy to read.

West Side Story (Level four)

Romeo and Juliet (Level six)

V. Biographies

Mary McCloud Bethune and *Gordon Parks* (With records.) *Doctor Martin Luther King* (Lots of pictures.)

VI. Filmstrips

From Hillhouse Librarian:

1. Parts of Speech
2. Parts of a Book
3. Knowing your Library

Sample Lesson in Writing

Objective Below is a blank outline. Think of a story that you have read or make up one. Fill in the outline. Write out your topic sentences and use one or two words in giving your details.

Title _____

I. A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

II. A.

B.

C.

D.

III. A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

F.

IV. A.

B.

C.

D.

Below, you can begin to write your story from your outline above. Be aware of your spelling and punctuation.

Sample Lesson in Literature

I usually try to lecture on each play story or poem read during the year. There are weekly tests on which students are able to write from their lecture notes. Homework assignments are centered around the piece read and the students are to form essays from their notes.

Step One

I explain the elements of literature: plot, setting, character (main and subordinate), motivation, climax, theme, resolution, and conflict. I always try to use a copy of *Aristotle's Poetics*. After each explanation, I write a short note on the board about each element and I either solicit questions or give several examples of each element from a story I spontaneously make up about the members of the class.

Step Two

Students read *Teacher, Teacher*. A lecture is given pointing out the main literary elements of this play. The students take notes on these elements as they are spoken and recorded on the board.

Step Three

Students write an essay (two paragraphs long) using their notes on *Teacher, Teacher*.

Step Four

Students read *Mr. Kincade, the Poet*. I lecture on the play without recording the notes on the board.

Step Five

Students write an essay on *The Poet* from their notes.

Step Six

In one paragraph students explain the elements of conflict in *Teacher, Teacher*. In another paragraph they discuss the theme of *The Poet*.

Step Seven

There is an oral discussion comparing the two plays.

N.B. All written assignments may be given as either classwork or homework.

Sample Lesson in Independent Study

Step One

Students pick a topic which interests them.

Step Two

Each student goes to the front of the class and solicits topic sentences and detail questions to be answered from his report. I assist in note-taking for each student.

Step Three

Students go to the school library, learn the simple skills of library use, and do research trying to find answers to the questions asked by classmates.

Step Four

Students report to the class, giving answers to questions asked.

Step Five

I assist each student in writing the first draft of his report. Conference time is scheduled until the paper is produced in final form. There is a space in the library reserved for these papers.

Step Six

The class is divided into panels for oral reports and discussions of topics worked on. About four students per day form a panel.

Bibliography-Reading for the Teacher

Linguistics and English Grammar . Gleason, H. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.

The Rhetoric of Fiction . Booth, W. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1961.

The Teaching of Writing in Our Schools . Corbin, R. New York: McMillan, 1966.

Education Index . Wilson, H. New York, 1900-1969.

Teaching Language , Composition and Literature . Fowler, M. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965.

Prose Techniques and Purposes . Kane, Thomas. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969.

Criticism : The Major Texts . Bates, Walter Jackson. Harcourt Brace and World, 1952.

Bibliography-Reading Required for Students

Skills Box . Robins, Richard. New York: Doubleday, 1970.

Composition-Models and Exercises . Stevens, K. New York, 1953.

Poetry Box “Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle.” Edited by Paul Mallory. Randon House, 1969.

Collected Poems by Langston Hughes . Hughes, L. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1959.

Striving . Edited by M. McVay. Challenger, 1971.

Brooklyn Story . Edwina Johnson. Challenger, 1970.

Bill Pickett . Hanes, Bailey. Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1977.

The Biography of Mary McCloud Bethune . Holt, Racham. New York: Doubleday, 1964.

The Autobiography of Gordon Parks . Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971.

The Learning Tree . Parks, Gordon. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

A Piece of Steak . London Jack. San Francisco Recorder—Sunset Press, 1946.

Nigger . Gregory, Dick. New York: Pocket Books, 1971.

Go Tell It On The Mountain . Baldwin, James. Dell Books, 1975.

Teacher , Teacher . Editors of *Scope* Magazine, 1971.

Dino . Editors of *Scope* , 1971.

Film Strips—The Parts of Speech—The Parts of a Book (Hillhouse Library).

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>