



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1981 Volume IV: Writing Across the Curriculum

---

## **The Sparkplugs: Special Occasions for writing In the History Classroom**

Curriculum Unit 81.04.03  
by Henry J. Brajkovic

Teachers of History courses are confronted with the task of implementing the new policy of required writing within their subjects. Many a time teachers wonder how to stimulate the thinking of their students, trying, without success, to induce an interest in a topic that was chosen by the teachers. The students had no choice in selecting the topic. Sometimes this arbitrary method tends to stifle their enthusiasm and does not bring about good results. If the task of writing is done on a set monthly schedule, it tends to become a dull and boring routine, and the work is occasionally not up to par.

### **Objectives**

How can teachers spark their interest so that the students will write with enthusiasm? One way would be to wait for the opportunity when the students initiate a class discussion on a topic they are interested in. This spontaneous exchange of ideas, of questions and answers between the teacher and the students prepares the groundwork for the writing of a composition. Since the students become personally involved in the subject being discussed, they are more willing to write out their opinions and feelings. This gives the students something to say that is not supplied exclusively by the teacher. This method is successful especially in a heterogeneous class because the discussion benefits the non-participants in helping them write their own compositions. In order to achieve this goal the teacher must be willing, on occasion, to give up the planned lesson for the class. It is profitable to have the students write the composition *immediately* after the discussion while the interest and memory are still alive. Therefore, the teacher should control the time spent on the discussion and leave sufficient time for the students to write out their compositions. By doing it in this manner it does not become a homework assignment, a separate burdensome task.

Each individual must have the right to express his own opinion about the topic while writing the composition. In order to achieve this the teacher has to foster an atmosphere of freedom of expression so that the students can say or write whatever they want to about the topic discussed, without fear of reprisal, i.e. not getting a lower mark. The teacher should guide the discussion but must make it clear that his opinions do not have to be accepted by the students.

This unit is directed primarily toward teachers of high school students but also to teachers of high-ability students in the middle schools.

## **Strategies**

### *Finding a Topic*

Where do the topics come from? The best response of the students toward a topic comes from a current event that hits the headlines rather than a topic from the textbook assignment. An example of a topic from current events: the attempted assassinations in 1981 on the lives of President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II.

Other topics can be drawn from anniversaries of special occasions, such as:

- Martin Luther King, Jr., Day
- Memorial Day
- Career Week
- Brotherhood Week
- United Nations Day
- Abraham Lincoln's Birthday
- George Washington's Birthday
- Flag Day
- Independence Day
- Labor Day
- Columbus Day
- Veteran's Day
- Powder House Day in New Haven

As an example, the teacher could select Brotherhood Week as the topic. The primary aim of observing Brotherhood Week in a classroom is to encourage the appreciation of the diversity of the American people and become aware of the contributions made by individuals of different cultural backgrounds.

It is a chance for the students to learn how members of various racial and ethnic groups enriched our society by their contributions in the performing arts, literature, culinary arts, architecture, etc. making America an exciting place to live.

This could be done in conjunction with the International Festival held on the New Haven Green or at Yale's International Festival, both of which are open to the public. By attending the Festival the students could experience first hand the cuisine of different cultures, see native costumes, and even enjoy the music and dances of many nations. At times they might be able to hear some foreign languages spoken by the people in the crowd.

The experience of attending such an International Festival could spur the students into seeking more knowledge about a particular nationality.

Many schools receive the Connecticut Governor's Proclamations honoring different historical personalities and different ethnic groups. Some examples are:

- Pulaski Day
- Indian Day
- Thanksgiving Day

The proclamations could be posted on the classroom bulletin board. This might induce some students to question the teacher about the Proclamation and lead into a discussion that will later result in the writing of a composition. Students might be sent to the library to utilize the encyclopedia or a biographical dictionary to gain more knowledge of a particular historical figure or topic.

Since some of the students become interested in pursuing the topic further, the teacher can assign these students to follow up on the topic and give oral reports from time to time.

Problems that are not resolved in certain corners of the world can become topics of inquiry for the students. The students can bring in newspaper clippings, magazine articles, or notes taken from a television "special" on the particular topic of their interest. Some of the on-going problems to be considered are:

- Israel and the Arab World
- the internal problems of Lebanon
- Northern Ireland and England
- Northern Ireland and the State of Ireland
- the internal problems of Poland
- Lybia as a supporter of terrorism or national liberation movements
- the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan
- El Salvador and the Insurgents
- Cuba and its influence on the Caribbean area

If more than one student pick the same topic, the teacher can assign them to take up differing viewpoints of the conflict and pursue their research from their particular angle. The next step could be the setting up of a debate on that one particular current event topic for the benefit of the whole class, especially the nonparticipating lower-ability students. This would give them a chance to learn about the topic under discussion. The debate could be on the point-counterpoint model.

The teacher can give extra credit to the students who take up a continuing inquiry approach of the topic. Their oral report on the on-going inquiry of the topic can be done from notes or newspaper clippings. This will make the other non-participants feel that the initial discussion of the topic was a worthwhile effort. It will also serve to bring the other students up-to-date on the topic. This experience will, hopefully, spur them into another spontaneous discussion at a later date when there is a further crisis developing pertaining to that particular current event topic.

The whole idea behind this method is to get the students to think and take sides on issues or on world problems, thereby acquiring knowledge to separate facts from personal opinions and being able to express it in writing. Therefore, any effort to turn these topics into major projects will kill the spontaneity one sought initially.

### ***Preparing the Students to Write***

The teacher could give the students a list of words pertaining to a major national event such as the political conventions. This type of work could be done at the beginning of the school year since some of the conventions are held in the summer. Some students might recollect some of the scenes they observed while watching the conventions on television. The teacher could give definitions of terms used in discussing the political conventions, thereby helping them understand the class discussion. Getting the students to understand the political process would help them write a composition about political conventions.

As the teacher and the students get into the discussion about the convention, naturally, the leading candidates for each political party will be examined more closely as to what their stands are on the different campaign issues.

This will bring forth expressions of candidate preferences and will make the discussion livelier. Students like to express their feelings about the presidential candidates. Some students might volunteer to do some research work on the personal background and qualifications of each presidential candidate. Other students might seek out information on each candidate's political beliefs and stands on issues by using newspapers and magazines. The students could take notes or underline the main ideas in the newspaper clippings, magazine articles, or campaign materials they have collected from local campaign offices of the various political parties. The next day the students can give oral reports to the class based on their findings. This activity would aid the other students and give them more material for the writing of the composition on political conventions.

One cannot study the convention simply as a political process per se since it might become dull for the students unless one brings into the discussion real people and issues that they can relate to. In order to bring this about another type of activity could be introduced. Some students could volunteer to play the role of: the Republican, the Democratic, or any other independent presidential candidate. Again, this type of activity would give the other students a better insight into each presidential candidate. One might ask: "Why is it necessary to have the oral reports or do role-playing?" Let us remember that not all students read the newspapers or follow the news on television or radio.

All students benefit, one way or another, when a teacher shows a filmstrip on political conventions. Further classroom discussion could occur during the showing of the filmstrip. Filmstrips that have captions would help the lower-ability students gain some knowledge of the topic, especially if they copied some of the captions as directed by the teacher. These notes would help them in writing out their composition. A film on the same topic is not as good since the lower-ability students may find it difficult to take notes while viewing the film.

Occasionally the teacher can assist the students during their composition writing by leaving on the blackboard the geographical and personal names of individuals or other key terms that are more difficult. This method would alleviate some of the tension for some of the students who find it difficult to spell strange names and places, freeing them to express their opinions or state the facts they have learned about the particular topic. The danger of continuing such a practice could lead to a lack of effort in learning the proper spellings of names and places.

### ***Setting Standards***

The teacher should set standards before the beginning of the composition writing. We all realize that not all students are college bound, yet we must instill high expectations in order to get better results in composition writing. Being satisfied with anything written on the paper is the wrong approach on the high school level. In setting the standards one should take into consideration the grade level of the students, and the make-up of the heterogeneous class.

One should upgrade the standards as the year progresses. The school year can start with short compositions but the teacher can demand longer compositions toward the end of the year.

Students want specific instructions before writing their composition so that they would know how to write their paper and how it will be graded. It makes them feel comfortable in knowing what is expected of them.

The teacher may wish to distribute to the class a list containing the guides for writing the composition. This list may be handed out in the beginning of the school year. The students are to keep the list for reference the rest of the school year. The list could contain the following:

- neatness (appearance of paper)
- legible penmanship
- correct spelling
- correct use of capital letters
- correct punctuation
- complete sentences
- organizing ideas:
  - title
  - good introduction
  - well-developed paragraphs
  - being consistent
  - logical conclusion on the topic

Proofread the composition before handing in assignment

When the composition is corrected and returned to the student, it is the student's responsibility to rewrite the composition with the corrections included. The teacher will then go over the paper, correcting it again, and give it a final grade.

### **Evaluation**

In the beginning of the school year one could correct the spelling, the punctuation, and the sentence structure without counting it against the student. One should try to encourage the students by praising their positive accomplishments in their writings. As the school year progresses one should look and strive for improvement in their composition writing.

In dealing with heterogeneous classes one has to take into consideration their individual abilities. Being too strict in correcting papers might "turn off" some of the students from writing in the future. The teacher has to get to know the students in order to judge their work and grade their papers accordingly.

## **SAMPLE LESSONS**

---

*Lesson One* : Teaching About Politics

*Topic* : Political Conventions

This lesson may take three to four class periods to cover. One can start the lesson by asking the students if any of them watched the television coverage of the Democratic or the Republican conventions. There is always someone who watched some part of the proceedings on television. The teacher could proceed with the following questions:

1. Who sets up a national convention?

Possible answer: The Democratic, Republican, or any independent National Committee for each party.

2. Who is picked to go to a convention?

Possible answer: Delegates chosen at the local level by local party politicians or by the local party members at their own political meetings.

3. Who decides which delegates will be accepted at the convention?

Possible answer: The Credentials Committee verifies the election of the delegates. It can accept or reject delegates.

4. What do we call a meeting of politicians planning some kind of political action?

Possible answer: Caucus

5. What is a committed delegate?

Possible answer: A committed delegate is one who must vote for a particular candidate. He cannot switch his vote to someone else.

6. What is an uncommitted delegate?

Possible answer: The uncommitted delegate is free to decide for whom to vote at the convention.

7. How do the delegates vote?

Possible answer: Delegates vote by a roll call, according to the alphabetical order of the states and the territories.8. Where do the political parties get the money to run a convention?

Possible answer: Each party has a national committee that receives financial contributions from individuals, businesses and corporations. Each city that has been chosen by the national committee as the site of the convention contributes toward the cost of running it with the hope that the convention will benefit the city financially.

By discussing the purpose and mechanics of setting up a national convention of a political party the students will learn the definitions of the appropriate terms pertaining to the topic under discussion.

The teacher can choose to teach the definitions and concepts of the following terms:

caucus	delegatecommitted delegate uncommitted delegate
alternate delegate	to nominate
to second	a state delegation
nominee	candidate
committee	credentials
party primaries	the presidency
president	vice-president
presidential candidate	favorite son candidate
qualifications for public office	keynote speaker
a political deal	pages (messengers)
running mate	auditorium
ballots	Convention Hall
roll call	alphabetical order
political demonstrations	political platform
goals and ideals	ideology
speeches	speech writer
ghost writer	political campaign

campaign workers	volunteers
supporters	financial contributions
political adviser	political strategist
the advance man	political backing
lobbyist	special interest groups
the ethnic vote	party affiliation
Democrat	Democratic
Republican	Independent
independent ticket	influential persons
politician	politics
to bolt the party	the press
the newspaper reporter	pollster
political commentators	television reporters
interviews	cameramen
conservative	liberal

A teacher may add or subtract words from the above list.

A good idea is to make a selection of the above words for a spelling or definition test prior to the writing of the composition. This would help the students produce a better composition.

The teacher may ask for volunteers to give oral reports about the different presidential candidates. Another method to stimulate the interest of the class would be to ask for volunteers to participate in role-playing as presidential candidates.

The teacher can show a filmstrip about political conventions giving ample time for students to copy captions from selected frames.

Once the students have learned the definitions of the terms, heard the class discussions, have seen the filmstrip, they will be amply prepared to write a composition in class on the topic.

The teacher can select one of the following themes for the composition:

1. Imagine yourself a delegate at the convention trying to persuade other delegates to vote for your candidate. What would you say to them?
2. You're a walking television cameraman on the convention floor. What do you see and hear?
3. You're a reporter interviewing one of the candidates. What kind of questions would you ask the candidate?
4. You're a page at the national convention. What would this experience teach you about politicians and politics?



*Lesson Two* : A spontaneous response to a major current event

*Topic* : Attempted Assassinations

This lesson is for one class period only.

A student walks into the classroom and asks the teacher: "What do you think about the assassination attempt on Reagan?" This question spurs the class into a spontaneous discussion on the previous day's major news event. Since the topic is a sensitive one, the teacher will control the discussion in a democratic way so that students with different viewpoints will have a chance to speak out their opinions about the event.

The teacher can interject some of the following questions to stimulate their thinking:

1. Were the Secret Service men doing their job?  
(If answer is yes or no, ask "Why?")
2. Should Congress pass gun control laws?
3. Should the president's activities be more restricted than in the past?
4. Do you feel that the media gave too much or too little coverage of the event?
5. Should reporters wait until they have complete, accurate information or give immediate hasty reports?
6. Can a democracy act like a police state in protecting the President?
7. Should there be a death penalty if the president is killed?
8. Do you feel that the media coverage triggers other assassination attempts on important individuals elsewhere in the world?

The discussion should not exceed more than 20 minutes of the classroom time so that there is ample time to write a short composition based on the students' own personal opinion about the topic.

The teacher can select one of the following titles for the composition:

1. My feelings about the assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan.
2. What I think about the assassination attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II.
3. How would you go about protecting heads of states?

### *Lesson Three : A Geography Lesson*

#### *Topic: Turmoil in the Persian Gulf*

This lesson could be covered in one class period.

Since the news from the Persian Gulf area has hit the headlines, before and after the Hostage Crisis, there has been a need for the students to know the geography of that area of the world. They may realize the importance of that area because of our need for oil supplies. The Middle East is the major oil supplier for the world. They are aware of this because of the rising fuel and gasoline prices.

The teacher may write out on the blackboard names of important Middle East personalities and list geographical names, such as:

the Arabian Peninsula	Strait of Hormuz
the Persian Gulf	Pakistan
United Arab Emirates	Baghdad
Iran	Iranian Prime Minister Ali-Rajai
Iraq	Iraqi president Saddam Hussein
Tehran	Ayatollah Khomeini
Saudi Arabia	Kuwait

It is suggested that the teacher distribute blank copies of a map of the Persian Gulf area to the students so that they can fill in the above-mentioned geographical names. The teacher could use a large wall map of this area to point out the above geographical places. This will help the students understand the current events discussed and enable them to write a short composition about the topic covered.

The teacher may leave the word list on the blackboard and the map visible so that the students might feel more comfortable in writing about the people and places discussed.

In limiting this lesson to one class period it is best not to overburden the students with too many difficult names and places. A long list may confuse them.

This type of lesson and method assists the students with lower abilities to function well in such a situation. It will help them in the process of writing the composition.

The teacher can select one of the following questions for the composition:

1. Why should the United States protect the oil fields and sea lanes in the Persian Gulf area?
2. Why is the U.S.S.R. interested in the Persian Gulf area?
3. What kind of a foreign policy should the United States have toward the Arab world?
4. Now that the Hostage Crisis is over, should the United States have friendlier relations with Iran?  
(If answer is yes or no, explain why.)

## *Lesson Four : Research Project*

### *Topic : Brotherhood Week*

This lesson could take up one or two weeks, depending on how much time the teacher wants to devote to this topic. The first week prior to the observance of Brotherhood Week could be spent in preparation for it. The second week could be set aside for the students' presentations.

It is suggested that the teacher start early in the school year gathering materials the students could use during the preparation week. The compilation of materials could consist of:

- art reproductions from various art magazines, museum post card reproductions, etc.
- a file of clippings of articles on ethnic personalities and cultures found in the Sunday edition of the New Haven Register in the "People" section.
- photographs of individuals, sometimes accompanied by an article from magazines like Newsweek, Time, People, etc.
- maps pertaining to a specific country or countries

During the first week the teacher could give the students a chance to examine the materials in the file and allow them to make a choice on which ethnic group, nationality, or individual they would like to report on. Also during the first week the students may bring in from home illustrations, pictures, artifacts, etc. for the classroom bulletin board.

For the students that cannot make up their minds what to write about the teacher can offer them the following choices of personalities:

- Igor Sikorsky, aeronautical engineer
- Fiorello LaGuardia, public official
- Charles Ives, American composer
- Joe Louis, boxer
- Helen Hayes, actress
- Eugene O'Neill, playwright
- Maria Callas, opera singer
- Miles Davis, jazz artist
- Allen Ginsberg, poet

The teacher can change the list.

In order to facilitate their research work the teacher could reserve the school library for two consecutive days since the students need a lot of time to locate the sources.

If some students write about a personality it should include the following:

- personal background of the individual
- education
- apprenticeship and work experience
- contribution(s) to society

Attending an International Festival during Brotherhood Week would enrich the students' lives. The students' impression of the International Festival could be included in their composition on a particular nationality.

This particular lesson would be different from the others in that the students would choose their own topic for the composition. Having a part in decision-making would spur the students to write with enthusiasm.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS**

---

Cooper, Charles and Lee Odell, eds. *Evaluating Writing* . N.C.T.E., 1977. Chapter Two discusses measuring changes in intellectual processes in writing. It gives examples of how to search for linguistic cues that show the shifting in the focus by writers of compositions. It also discusses diagnosing writing problems and making qualitative distinctions in the writings of two students.

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* . Urbana, Illinois: N.C.T.E., 1971. Of particular interest to the teachers would be Chapter Four and Five which give profiles of Twelfth-grade composition writers and how they go about writing compositions.

Gibson, Walker. *Seeing and Writing* . New York: Longman, 1959. The writer discusses the use of senses in the process of writing, giving many short examples by famous and unknown writers. It also includes writing exercises in history, psychology, and anthropology.

Hirsch, E.D. *The Philosophy of Composition* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. Chapter Six discusses various handbooks by Strunk, Gowers, Crews, McCrimmon and Lucas. He discusses their various advice to would-be writers.

Larson, Richard L. *Teaching Before We Judge : Planning Assignments in Composition* from The Leaflet, 66, No. 1, pp 3-15, New England Association of Teachers of English. 1967. An excellent practical guide in planning assignments in composition. He gives specific advice.

Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* . Houghton, Mifflin, 1968. Chapter Six criticizes the use of textbooks in the teaching of writing. He believes that teaching separately English, Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies is a big mistake. He advocates a “Discourse” fusing all the above subjects.

Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Chapter Eight on “Expectations” gives samples of students work in the early stages of composition writing and later improved samples of work.

## **MATERIALS FOR CLASSROOM USE**

---

1. Filmstrips with records or, lately, cassettes are available from the New York Times on special current topics.
2. Filmstrips with captions are available for weekly news or on special topics from: VEC, Inc., P.O. Box 52, Madison, Wis., 53701
3. Newspaper The New Haven Register or The Journal-Courier Newspaper in Education Program (copies for classroom use) The use of the newspaper makes classroom lessons in current events a real life experience for the students.

Write to: Beverly Schultz, The Jackson Newspapers, Long Wharf, 40 Sargent Drive, New Haven, CT 06511 or call: 562-1121, Ext. 458 or Toll Free 1-800-922-6628.

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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