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Growing Toward Best Practice

Jennifer Ochoa

Sometimes terrific failure necessitates great change. Last school year ended with terrific failure—the kids', and ultimately, my own. At the end of last year, a record number of 30 kids failed the second semester of my class. The kids who failed were not stupid, and they did not hate my class, nor did they hate me. Actually, they were all quite pleasant, exceptionally disappointed, but quite pleasant about failing. This grand failure can best be summed up in the story of Lakesha.

Lakesha is a great kid. She is funny and intelligent. She is brassy and strong. She is well-liked by her peers and her teachers. And in 9th grade English, Lakesha became an avid reader. If you asked Lakesha what she thought about 9th grade English, she would probably say she really liked it. She would probably say that there were days that were boring, but she had a good teacher, and generally it was fun. I know this is her overall assessment of my class because I asked her at the end of the year for her opinion.

As Lakesha came to get her final grade on the last day of school, she handed me a stack of books she had borrowed in the last two months. I looked at the stack she was handing me, and I felt my heart squeeze because I had to tell her she had failed the semester. When I told Lakesha her final grade, a bolt of disappointment flashed in her eyes, and then she gave me a crooked smile and said, "Oh well, I guess I'll see you next year."

Throughout the rest of that day, I left Lakesha's stack of books on my desk as a constant reminder of what she had accomplished during the semester. I looked from the stack of books to her empty line in my grade book, ending in 43 percent, again and again. I agonized about what to do. Should I give her a passing grade? She read tons of books. Every book we read in class, she finished in two days and then wanted to devour a sequel. She remembered every character and every plot of every story and novel we encountered together. She came to me at

least once a week and asked for a "good book recommendation." But no matter how much her reading flourished, Lakesha would not do one single piece of assigned work. She made mild attempts to begin large assignments like essays and projects. And she religiously turned in her notebook every other Friday, except it was always empty. Over and over I held conferences with Lakesha, as I did with all my students, to let her know exactly what she needed to do to be successful in our class. She always left the conferences clutching her list of missing assignments and pronouncing she would "get all of this done and turn it right in." She never followed through on those promises. Lakesha simply refused to jump through my hoops.

Throughout that last day, as I agonized over Lakesha's grade, I thought about all I hoped to teach the kids in my classes. I hoped to teach them to love reading and writing and to become better at both aspects of their literacy. But I also hoped to teach them responsibility and how to follow through with a plan. If I passed Lakesha, would she learn that she really didn't have to do what was required of her, no matter what people said? Would I teach her that if you barely scrape by, doing a minimum job, you still get what you want? Would I teach her it is not important to complete what you say you will do? Was becoming a lifetime reader enough to let her 43 percent stand as a passing grade for 18 weeks worth of work? What if my hoops were not the really important hoops to jump through?

Lakesha failed my class. I have revisited that decision and questioned its validity every single day this past summer. And Lakesha, along with her 29 other flunking partners, has caused me to seriously reconsider my hoops.

An Examination

When I think about my teaching life, it constantly amazes me that every day I create things for

people to do, and those people generally comply. When I stop to think about the power I have in my classroom, I agonize over the kids who fail. Why won't they do what I ask? And what if my requirements are not correct or good for them? I read a lot professionally. I am active in several professional educational circles. I dedicate a good portion of my free time to thinking about and organizing my teaching. But what if I am wrong? What happens to the kids who fall through the cracks in my carefully crafted, supposedly crack-free classroom? What happens to the kids stuck in the shadows?

These questions steer me towards examining my teaching and wondering if I am indeed using "best practice" for the kids I teach. I know I'm doing a lot of things right, but I keep asking myself, "Why did kids, who liked my class and liked me, fail?" Usually, failures in my class are not due to lack of ability or intelligence. Generally kids who fail my class choose to do so by not doing what I am asking of them. And so, in reflecting on myself as a teacher, I am left with, "what about those kids?" I am desperately trying to evolve into the teacher who can create a classroom in which the kids who haunt me with their failure could have succeeded. And so I first think about what I was taught and what I believe about teaching.

In the Beginning...

I could not wait to be an English teacher. I wanted to help students discover themselves as readers and writers. I wanted to help these readers and writers appreciate and find their tremendous versatility and beauty in words.

These are early words from my young, idealistic self. At the time I wrote the piece that contains this quote, I was in my senior year of college, deep in the midst of all of my English Education methods courses. I was armed with Atwell, Rosenblatt, Calkins, lots of enthusiasm and excitement. I just knew that teaching was my calling. I was so sure of myself as a future teacher.

Early in my career as an English Education student, I began to read about whole language. At first, I didn't understand what the theory was all about. I remember one professor saying that whole language was more than what you did in a classroom, it was a belief about the way people learned to read and write, and it guided what you did in the classroom. At that time, I had three language arts methods courses. All my studies were about what I did in the classroom. Although I was constantly creating unit plans filled with wonderful lessons, I didn't understand that the lessons had to come from someplace, some belief system about the how and why of people reading and writing in a class-

room.

Once I began to comprehend the notion that what you did with students in a classroom developed from your beliefs about reading and writing, whole language, as a theory, became much clearer to me. The notion that immersing people in authentic literacy experiences furthered their literacy development made logical sense. In remembering my own English classes in junior high and high school, I recalled detesting the composition formulas for writing perfect five-paragraph essays and the artificial reading lab we attended for practice in speed reading and SRA Readers. I was successful at these artificial literacy experiences, but I was generally successful at most reading and writing tasks. As an English Education student, I could see how many students probably met with lots of failure in the reading lab, or never wrote one correct five-paragraph essay. Judging from my friends, most of whom were quite intelligent, but who hated to read and couldn't write without sounding wooden and formulaic, I decided that traditional literacy tasks must not be the best plan for English classrooms.

When I read Nancie Atwell's, *In the Middle*, I decided a classroom just like hers was the place I wanted to teach. I liked the idea that in a reading or writing workshop, students could work at their own pace, developing as they naturally would, but using my expertise as their guidance. I also really liked the student/teacher interactions sustained in a workshop classroom. I saw authentic literacy conversations developing during writing conferences and in letter exchanges which involved teacher and student. Atwell reported such success with her classes, I knew it could work for me if I taught exactly the same way Atwell did. Atwell's book was so thorough that I completely imagined setting up my class by just following her recipe.

At the same time I was trying to clone myself as Nancie Atwell, I was reveling in plans for whole class activities, like reading novels and plays. I was filled with ideas to help kids respond authentically to what we were reading. My ideas blossomed when I read Louise Rosenblatt's, *Literature as Exploration*. I had always understood through my own voracious reading something more was happening between me and a book than my comprehension of words on a page. I lived in books. I wanted to help kids live in books, too. I knew after reading Rosenblatt that simply handing kids worksheets with questions after every story or chapter we read together would not help them love to read and find a life in books. I could not wait to hold lively discussions with students about their interpretations of the literature we read.

As I prepared to enter the real world of teach-

ing, I wanted to help students come to writing "not stilted and stifled by a teacher's red pen." I wanted to help my students discover writing borne of "their own natural voice." I believed, at that point, that if I helped students find an individual process of writing, and I offered them the choice to write about whatever they wanted to, I would create little authors. Likewise, I was sure if I let students read good books and I didn't anchor them with monotonous questions at the end of everything they read, I would create little readers.

I clearly remember thinking that if I developed a vigorous, student-centered classroom based on best practice which offered authentic reading and writing experiences, my students would flourish. However, I hadn't had the opportunity to see what this kind of classroom looked like peopled with real kids. And so my next step in examining my work is to look at what I actually did and why I did it.

Let There be Light!

I did not immediately put into place all of the pedagogical plans that I had as a student since I had to figure out how to teach three different levels of students in three different English subject matters. I was trying to organize my classes, set up a gradebook, fit into the social/political system the other teachers already had in place, decorate my classroom, and organize the desks. But mostly, I needed to figure out what to do with a classroom full of thirty kids, five times a day, every day, for an entire week, much less a whole school year.

During that first year, I did try to do some workshop time with both the seniors I taught and also the freshmen. I tried Writing Workshop with the seniors and Reading Workshop with the freshmen. The seniors never did what I asked them to do. They used any workshop time I gave them as completely social. I always levied heavy taxes on their grades if they did not "use their time wisely," but they really didn't seem to care. On the other hand, the freshmen I taught were "enriched," and they did everything I ever asked of them because they had figured out the school game. If I asked them to bring a book and read for an hour, whether they were engaged in what they were reading or not, they brought a book and read. Those freshmen always earned all of their Reading Workshop points, but looking back, I'm not sure many of them picked up a lifetime habit of reading from that year, and that was ultimately my goal for them.

In teaching ninth grade these past five years to "general" students, I always began by trying to find young adult short stories and novels with high interest for my very uninterested students. I wanted to find ways to help my students have a strong

engagement with the literature we were reading. I tried to make the responses to literature I designed capture many of the ways they might be interacting with what they had read. Because the kids can generally relate to what we read and like what we read, I have had a lot of success getting kids to begin reading on their own. Lots of kids come into my classes hating to read, and when they leave, if they don't exactly love to read, they at least think it is not such a boring activity. This fact is of particular pride to me. The most complementary comments students generally give me is in the area of learning to like reading.

As in reading, I tried to find writing that would really engage kids. The problem with writing for me is that I personally like to read better than I like to write. I love to talk about books and reading with kids. Getting myself excited about a writing conversation is not as easy. Maybe that is why I have trouble helping kids become great writers. No matter what I try, I have not been able to shape a writing program that works exceptionally well. I experimented with writing workshop in different forms. I held student/teacher writing conferences and peer-group writing conferences utilizing pairs and small groups of students. I dipped into lots of ways to conduct peer response, revising, and editing sessions. I cautiously ventured into portfolios. But I have never felt as if I were really doing a good job teaching writing.

Over the last two school years, I began writing with the students. This practice has helped me. I don't really feel like I am doing a better job teaching the kids to write, but I am able to easily find the assignments I have given that work and that don't work. I think the kids also like the fact that I am sweating along with them.

Almost as soon as I began teaching, I became professionally involved. I was really lucky to find a professional home in the Red Cedar Writing Project. Because of my involvement with the Writing Project, I started to go to conferences, read professional literature, and participate in lively teaching discussions with other teachers who shared my beliefs and interests. Being surrounded by so much critical input about teaching helped me stay thoughtful about my own teaching style, beliefs, and the practices in my classroom. I have come to count on this professional support system to act as my sounding board and my guide as I try to wiggle my way out of the ooze to establish a really strong classroom.

However, constantly listening to wonderful teachers talk about all their great success is not always the best thing for a fumbling new career. In being critical of my own teaching and listening to the successes of other teachers, I often wondered why my kids won't perfectly do what other kids are

perfectly doing for other teachers. Many times I conducted lessons just as I heard them explained, both in books and at conferences. And many times, the wonderful lessons that help kids become voracious readers and voluminous writers in other classrooms, take 10 minutes of mild engagement with my kids and then they are ready to move on to something else. I have a lot of trouble stepping back and seeing the wonders occurring in my own classroom.

In my years of teaching, I have established a mild comfort zone for myself. I don't really worry about what to do every day, I am pretty good at lesson plans. But I look at the kids racing through my classes every year, and a touch of discomfort remains. "Have I done the best job for these students that I possibly could?" "What could I have done differently or better to help these students be more successful?" My own constant questioning of my practice has caused a yearly revamping of my courses. As I stand at the beginning of a new school year, I again wonder, what should stay, what should go, and what should change?

Looking for the Source

In spite of my high failure rate last school year, I know that the structure I set up in my classroom is especially "kid friendly." I try to let kids know exactly where they stand in the class, at least once a week. I constantly call parents to tell them how they can help their students be successful in class. I make myself available for extra help and a quiet place to do work at least four lunch periods a week. I will stay after school with kids who need more time to complete assignments. I strive to help my students be aware of and responsible for their growth as literate individuals. I create units of study that will be relevant and interesting to ninth graders. I try to be tough when they need tough, and nurturing when they need to still be kids. But that nagging question keeps coming back, "Why did so many kids fail my class?"

As I think over what I do and the kind of practices I have in place, I have come to the conclusion that a big part of the problem lies in expectations and grading. Because I work in a traditional public high school, grades are very important. Grades determine whether a child will move to the next level of study, or repeat a class where she was unsuccessful. In my years of teaching, I tried to create a fair grading system. I use points instead of letter grades. An assignment's worth is then determined by the amount of points it is given. For instance, an essay we have worked on for two weeks may be worth 50 points and a 1/2 page journal entry may be worth 5 points. I like the grading system I have developed, and I don't really think it

needs to change much. What does need to change is what I grade.

In the past, on Reading Workshop day, students were expected to bring a book and read. They were then graded on whether they spent the allotted time actually reading. There were no further requirements for Reading Workshop other than a letter they had to write to me about what they had read. My intent was then to write back to all of my students every week, very Atwellian.

The way Reading Workshop manifested itself in my class was as "the day everyone hated." Because my goal was to get students to read for the sake of reading, I did not want to encumber them with lots of reading requirements, and besides, it worked in Atwell's class every day. I was sure my students could handle reading for 30 minutes every Thursday. However, on Thursdays, I became the Reading Nazi, while kids figured out ways to fool around and still look like they were reading. They never created reading expectations for themselves. Even kids like Lakesha, who liked to read, did not actively participate in reading during workshop time; they mostly read at home. With 130 students, early on, I stopped responding in a meaningful way to their letters, and so did they.

Likewise, every single time I tried to have a Writing Workshop day or a conferencing day, students played around, and I had to constantly stop working with individuals or groups to yell for order. Everyone felt frustrated and cheated, most especially, me.

I always like everything to be even and in its place. I did not want my grade book cluttered and messy-looking. Therefore, I only gave students grades for the things I actually asked them to do. When students like Lakesha became avid readers, I was elated, I told everyone, but I never rewarded those students with grades for their newfound habits. I was not flexible enough to let the way my students were growing and changing reflect in their grades.

I also think that, while the students enjoyed what we did everyday in class, they really had no clear notions of how I came up with my hoops, so it was easy not to care about jumping through them. I did not tell students about my theories of reading and writing; I did not explain the beliefs that drove the lessons. I just expected them to buy into my plan. For students like Lakesha, who have never really been exceptionally successful academically, not knowing my bigger picture for her literacy education hindered her success. If I had ever told Lakesha why I expected her to complete the assignments I designed, or how and why I designed such assignments, and how her literacy would be affected, she may have been more likely to care about

their completion. As I searched for change this summer, I realized I needed to find ways to let my students into the great literacy plans I had for all of them. I also needed to tell them where those plans were born, and I needed to find concrete ways to show them that their growth was not only wonderful and important, but essential to their success in my class.

Looking to Professional Resources

As I began soul-searching this past summer about my classroom, my teaching philosophies, and the things I needed to change to help kids be more successful in my classes, I read several professional books. I hoped these books would help me rethink the framework of my class and help me move to practices that would encourage student success. I hoped these books would begin to give me some idea of how to capitalize on my students' literacy achievements, both those I assigned them and those they reached on their own. Below is a detailed description of what I found useful and what I hope to incorporate in my classroom from four different books.

A Measure of Success by Fran Claggett

I originally wanted to read this book because it is a book about assessment. After the grand failure of last year, I wanted to read something that would help me think about how I was grading students in my classes. This book really helped me do that, especially in the area of reading.

The second chapter of this book, "Assigning and Assessing Reading," was a literal goldmine for me. I loved that students were really starting to find pleasure in reading in my class. What I didn't know how to do was assess the reading that my students were doing. To begin with, I like the self-assessment of reading she gives students. I think kids would be able to find themselves in this assessment. I plan to use this assessment piece to launch the first reading group meeting my ninth grade students will have this year.

The second part of this chapter that will find its way into my reading program is the reading rubric that Claggett introduces. This six-point rubric was designed by a group of California teachers and is widely used in the state. I plan to rewrite the rubric in "kid-speak" and distribute it in my classes. This rubric will then become the basis of the students' own self-evaluations of their reading, and will be the starting point of the reading conferences students will have with me.

The last thing the chapter offered that I felt was extremely valuable was the Reading Assessment Test given in California. I liked this standardized test's format because I think it really cut to the

bone of what is happening when someone reads a text. I plan to use this test format in my senior composition class as a basis for our discussions of holistic scoring.

I also liked Claggett's chapter on portfolio usage in the writing classroom. I have long wanted to begin an extensive use of portfolios in my classes, but I have never been organized enough to put portfolios into practice. This year, I don't think that I'm going to begin using portfolios on a large scale because I don't really feel like I can change everything at once. When I do begin using portfolios next year, I will revisit this chapter as a guide.

"You Gotta BE the Book" by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

I originally read this book a year ago, and I was immediately fascinated. Wilhelm started to wonder why some of the students in his middle school classes loved to read and why some students really hated to read. He began a search mission to find out about kids' reading attitudes and habits by asking the students that he knew loved to read what happened to them when they read. The students reported becoming a part of the story in different ways, but especially by "seeing" the story happen in their heads. I love to read, and I have always known that a story becomes alive for me, but I never really looked at what was happening in my head as I read in a metacognitive way.

As I was reading Wilhelm, I was also reading a murder mystery for pleasure. While reading the mystery, I began to stop and think about what was happening in my head as I read. I became aware of watching the action as though it were a movie. At one point, I completely visualized a chase scene between the heroine and the murderer. I thought, "I am watching him chase her down the hall, down the stairs, and through the kitchen." The text only described the killer chasing the victim through the house, not the path that they followed during the chase. I realized I filled in the rest of the scene with my own pictures of what I thought should be happening. That single incident changed the way I approach reading talk with kids.

Once Wilhelm discovered the action-related interactions that kids were having as they read, he talked to the kids that didn't like to read or were considered poor readers. Those students most definitely did not see pictures as they read, and in fact, were not even aware of such a phenomenon.

The practice portion of Wilhelm's book is dedicated to showing ways we can teach kids to have active, vision-filled interactions with what they read. He describes many techniques that can be utilized in the classroom to encourage visualization. One thing that Wilhelm asks kids to do is interact artistically with literature. He has created

several ways to encourage this artistic interaction including a technique he calls Visual Protocols. I already tried Visual Protocols several times last year, and students reported how helpful an activity it was.

During a Visual Protocol, students are asked to stop reading at a point in which they are having a really strong visualization and to draw the visualization. In my classes, I asked kids to stop and draw whatever they were seeing at a point I knew would illicit strong visualizations. I did this several times, using several stories. Eventually, I just asked kids to stop and draw on their own whenever they knew they were having a strong visualization. Students who previously reported negative attitudes towards reading began to like reading in our class. They talked about "looking for pictures" in their heads, whereas, previously, reading was simply decoding words on a page.

Wilhelm also uses a lot of drama in his classes to help students see the physical action the words they are reading represent. I am not a person who has ever been very interested in drama, but I know that my students love plays. This year, I would like to include more ways to use dramatics in my classroom. I can see a high potential for dramatics in helping students make their visualizations concrete.

Basically, when I began to talk with kids about the kinds of things Wilhelm talks with his kids about, namely visualizing what they are reading, entering the storyworld, and interacting with the characters in the literature they encountered, my students' perceptions of reading changed. For many of the kids, reading really did begin to live for them. That was always my goal.

Envisioning Literature by Judith A. Langer

I loved this book because it took a critical, philosophical stance on why we should teach literature and then made that stance concrete by showing how theory looks in real classrooms. I like reading theory books, but the best theory books, I think, are those that show how the theory manifests itself for teachers and students.

Langer's notion of "literary thinking," and how the way we think and question what we read is really the way we think and question our encounters with the world is fascinating. I can see how I move through the four stances to build envisionments when I read and when I move about in the world. I'm not sure how I would present these stances in a class, maybe I wouldn't.

The other thing I really like about this book is the many ways Langer shows questioning in the classroom. I have always felt I was really lacking in the ways I got students to talk about literature.

Actually, the problem was the ways I didn't get students to talk about literature. I have always been good at creating really wonderful written and artistic literary responses for kids, but I needed help on what to do immediately following the reading of a particular text. The classroom conversations Langer reports will help me frame my own use of questioning in my classroom.

On the Brink by Susan Hynds

One reason I loved this book is because it legitimized my entire teaching career. It is a whole book about what happens in real classrooms that don't end up perfect like most of the teaching books out there. This book is all about a teacher trying to build an engaging, inviting, safe classroom that tapped into her students' diversity and intelligence and multiple talents, and how creating this kind of classroom doesn't always work smoothly with real kids. The teacher in this book was going through the same soul-searching I am currently struggling with. This book was so closely related to my life that the demographics of the particular school the class took place in rivaled Sexton, right down to being located in an urban center next to a university town.

The parts of this book that were especially helpful to me were the chapters which described the self-analysis and change that the teacher went through. When Hynds wrote about what the teacher actually did in her classroom, I constantly translated those practices to my own classroom.

In the end, the parts of this book I took away with me will create huge changes in my own classroom this year. The teacher in the book decides at one point, after much failure, to move to a "center" classroom. This teacher combines reading and writing into six learning centers in which students may participate. She uses the centers everyday, with little whole class work. My class this year will be a variation of this practice.

Being able to witness someone else's struggle and then being able to utilize that teacher's solutions was incredibly heartening for me. This book made me realize that I was not crazy to think I was a bad teacher compared to all of the teachers in the books I was reading. This book made me realize that maybe some of the successes that are generally reported, are done so in the absence of the failures that will inevitably happen when you work with real, live kids.

Out of the Primordial Ooze I Climb

I really do revel in change in my teaching. I like to constantly imagine how things could be done differently, could work better, and help kids be more successful. I needed this summer to rethink critically what I was doing with kids, and if that was

best helping them become better readers and writers and more literate citizens of the world. I don't think I was doing that badly. What helped me this summer was reading professionally to see what other English teachers were doing to help kids. The books I read, the thinking I did, and the conversations I held with some of my colleagues have all translated into a new and improved Ochoa Ninth Grade English as shown in the Appendix.

In my new course description I have included two workshop days a week. I borrowed the learning center idea from Hynds' book to develop these workshop days. I wanted to make kids really responsible for their own time and their own development, but I didn't want to leave them so "on their own" that they would have room to do nothing. Therefore, I will offer many choices of what they can do within that time, within those centers, but they are responsible for creating their own plans for workshop days, and they are responsible for following through with those plans.

Also in the course outline are more opportunities to earn points for non-writing activities. Before, I encouraged students to read widely on their own, but I only rewarded their grades for that reading when it was followed by something in writing. Kids like Lakesha who read a lot, didn't have that reading count for them because for them, the reading was an end in itself. Therefore, when students read, they will get points. I have put in the expectation of a certain amount of reading to combat the actions of many kids who began a book in September and were only half way through it in June. I have also included the expectation that students produce some kind of response to those books. However, I have not made the response count more than the reading, which I have done in the past. I have also allowed students who read a lot to profit from that reading by offering students points for all the books they read, not just the books they are expected to read.

In terms of what will actually happen in class, I plan to include dramatics and graphics as reading responses and writing options, as Wilhelm has shown. I also plan to use some of the questioning techniques that occur in Langer's book. I will be using the reading assessments, both self and standardized, and the reading rubric directly from Claggett's book.

Overall, I am really excited about starting this school year. The first assignment for students will be to go over the course outline and report their opinions, questions, worries, and excitement about our class. I can't wait to read what they have to say!

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About the Author

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Appendix

Dear Parents and Students,

Welcome to Sexton High School and welcome to your Freshman year. This is an exciting time for both of you as you begin to embark on a high school career. As students enter high school, they have lots of very serious expectations they must fulfill. These expectations come from all angles, parents, teachers, the school, and also from the students themselves. I have been teaching ninth grade for six years, and every year I hear several parents mutter the same fateful words to their children: "I told you that high school was about NOT playing around." Unfortunately, with lots of new people, more freedom and independence and lots more space, sometimes ninth grade is a time when some kids really start to fall down on the job. This letter intends to let both the parents and students in my classes know exactly what my expectations for Ninth Grade English are, and how students can be successful in this class.

I consider my class a "literacy building classroom." The State of Michigan has defined literacy in English classrooms as "reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing." This means in my classroom I try to build all of these skills into the activities I ask students to complete. Many times in class, the students will have very directed time, in which I will give them instructions and they will be expected to complete tasks. Other times, I will give students more undirected time to choose what they will do themselves. I build this time in because I think that it is important for kids to practice making a plan and following through with that plan responsibly. I also believe that the most fair way to teach is to let kids know my overall goals and expectations for them. Therefore, early in the year, all students will

be given the list of standards the Lansing School District has developed for kids in Ninth Grade English. This list tells students exactly what they are expected to be able to do by the time they finish their Freshman year. Throughout the year, we will closely examine this list to see that we are meeting all of these expectations in our class. Please ask your child to show you these standards so you also know what we expect of students.

Below I have given you the organization of this class. It is a bit complicated, but with so many expectations, it takes a little chaos to fit everything in. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me or e-mail me.

Thank you,

Ninth Grade English

How the week will be scheduled:

Every week we will follow roughly the same schedule using Tuesdays and Thursdays as workshop days. On these days, students will be expected to make a work plan for themselves based on choices given by the teacher. Every Tuesday and Thursday, students will need to bring with them their plan for themselves for the day. Those plans will be turned in at the beginning of the hour, and students will receive from 0-5 points on their plans based on how well they are working on what they have said they were going to do. I will keep the cards on file, and students will receive one grade for the marking period on their workshop participation. Tuesdays will be dedicated to Writing Workshop and Thursdays will be dedicated to Reading Workshop. At the beginning of every workshop period, we will have a 5-10 minute mini lesson on some aspect of reading or writing. Each workshop day, four centers will be available for students to work in, as follows:

Writing Workshop:

Getting Started—a space for students who are working on thinking, brainstorming, and beginning pieces.

Drafting—a space for students who are in the middle of working on a piece, by themselves or with other students.

Publishing and Performing—a space for students to work on final copies of written pieces or for students to work on combining writing with some other art form, such as drawing or acting.

Conferencing—a space for students who need to meet with me or others to work on drafts of their writing. There will be a sign-up sheet for students who need to meet with me. I will meet with as many students as time permits.

Reading Workshop:

Quiet Reading—a space for students who would like to quietly read books of their own choosing.

Reading Response—a space for students to work on their two responses to the books they are reading or to spend time writing in their group's reading log.

Listening—a space where students can listen to books or poetry on tape.

Reading Groups—Each student will be randomly assigned to a reading group. This small group will work together for the semester, discussing the books they are reading, and responding to those books in a group reading log. Each reading group must plan to meet at least two times per marking period. If a group is planning to meet, they must sign up by the Tuesday prior to the Thursday on which they would like to meet. Only two groups may meet per Thursday.

Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, we will meet all together as a class to work on whole class reading and writing activities. You will often have small, in-class and homework assignments based on what we are doing together as a class.

The Class Notebook:

You will need to acquire a sturdy notebook for this class. This will be your class notebook and I will perform notebook checks every other Friday, three times per marking period. Your notebook will have several purposes:

1. Responses to class reading, viewing, listening, and discussion
2. Notes from reading and writing mini-lessons
3. In class and homework assignments
4. Daily Focus Questions (Mon., Wed. and Fri.)—these questions will be written on the board and are designed to get you focused on what we will be discussing that day, or what we have discussed in past classes. Each Focus Question needs to be answered by writing approximately 1/2 of a page in your notebook. Each Focus Question is worth 5 points.

Reading Requirements:

Each student must read at least two books per marking period of his or her own choosing. They will discuss these books in their Reading Groups and each student will have two Reading Conferences with me per marking period in which we will discuss what they are reading. Each book they read during a marking period is worth 15 points. If a student chooses to read more than two books, they are welcome to get points for that reading as well. Students will also be expected to complete a Book Response project for each of the two books they read. There will be Book Response options posted in the classroom and each student will get a copy of these options to keep. Each Book Response project is worth 15 points, as well.

Reading groups need to meet at least two times per marking period. These meetings can take place during Reading Workshop time. Each student will receive up to 10 points for participating in their

Reading Group meetings. Students will write a personal response to each meeting as part of the 10 points. Also, each reading group will be given a Reading Log notebook. In this notebook, members of the reading group will write weekly letters to each other about what they are reading. I will also be writing letters sometimes in the Reading Logs. Each student is expected to write at least one letter per week in the group Reading Log. These letters are worth 5 points each. I will add up these points and give you one Reading Log grade at the end of the marking period.

Writing Requirements:

Our class will be doing a lot of writing. We will have writing assignments frequently given based on what we are doing in class. These assignments will be given various points. In addition to these assignments, students will be expected to complete 50 points worth of Writing Invitations per marking period. Writing Invitations are assignments from which students make choices. I will post at least one or two new Writing Invitations per week, usually on Writing Workshop day. Writing Invitations will be worth various points (also posted) and students need to choose at least 50 points worth to complete. Students may complete more than 50 points worth of Writing Invitations.