


July 2022

## A Spark of Light in the Darkness: A Framework of Habits and Routines that Grow Literacy Identities

Andy Schoenborn

Clare Public Schools, [aschoenborn76@gmail.com](mailto:aschoenborn76@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

 Part of the [Secondary Education Commons](#), [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Schoenborn, Andy (2022) "A Spark of Light in the Darkness: A Framework of Habits and Routines that Grow Literacy Identities," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 54: Iss. 3, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol54/iss3/12>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

# A Spark of Light in the Darkness: A Framework of Habits and Routines that Grow Literacy Identities

by Andy Schoenborn

In my experience of teaching a wide range of English courses, I have learned that it is no secret that some populations of students harbor a dislike for reading and writing. It could be that they have not had the opportunity to choose what they read and write, reflected on what they have learned, felt encouragement to explore texts for their own purposes—or received positive responses about their reading and writing from teachers. After I transferred schools and shifted from teaching AP to alternative education, my new students didn't know what to expect from me, and I encountered preconceived notions about English class immediately.

On the first day of school, students filed into my classroom talking with each other as they do every year. And, before I had the chance to welcome them, the first conversation I heard was, “So this is the English teacher, huh? I'll tell you this, I hate reading, I hate writing, and, if he tries to make me do either, I'll probably hate him too.” Ouch!

Again, one of my students had convinced herself that yet another English class just wasn't for her. Though this was one student who voiced her opinion, the smiles, nods, and sighs of those in her group of friends told me that she was not alone in her assessment of “another English class.” What she didn't know was that I wanted her (and her classmates) to experience an English class centered on students with the intent of developing literacy identities, not one that focused only on reading canonical novels and writing literary analysis essays.

## Not Your Traditional English Class

Building literate identities requires habits, routines, and encouragement. Though these ideas are not new (e.g. Atwell, 1998; Burke, 2003, 2012; Gallagher,



**Andy Schoenborn**

2006, 2011; Gallagher & Kittle, 2018, 2021; Hicks & Schoenborn, 2020; Kittle, 2008; Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015), they are well-known for moving adolescents toward an identifiable arc that helps them reconnect to the English classroom.

According to the International Literacy Association's position statement and research brief, *Engagement and Adolescent Literacy* (2019), “In order to thrive as literacy learners, students must feel a sense of collective and individual belonging (Comber, Woods, & Grant, 2017), have opportunities to contribute to and negotiate the literacy culture, and feel safe to take risks (McKay & Dean, 2017).” To meet those goals, I establish a predictable, yet flexible, learning routine incorporating promising practices in two ways. First, I design my classes intentionally using a metacognitive arc beginning with a “preflection” strategy. The “preflection strategy [is] designed as a tool to enhance and enrich the reflection process” (Falk, 1995). Then I incorporate recurring mid- and end-term progress checkpoints and end with a reflective final exam. See Table 1 for details and the Appendix for resources.

Second, I establish purposeful daily and weekly routines adapted from workshop approaches (e.g. Atwell, 1998;

Table 1

*Metacognitive Arc, Adapted from Creating Confident Writers: For High School, College, & Life, Hicks and Schoenborn (2020)*

<b>Metacognitive Arc for a Semester or Trimester</b>			
<b>Preflection</b> (Week 1)	<b>Mid-Term Progress</b> (Week 6 or 9)	<b>End-Term Progress</b> (Week 12 or 18)	<b>Final Reflection</b> (Week 12 or 18)
My ELA Journey	MP1 Creative Writing MP1 Reading Analysis MP1 Growth Territories	MP2 Creative Writing MP2 Reading Analysis MP2 Growth Territories	Reflective Final Exam

Kittle, 2008) that begin with a celebration of spoken word poetry, alternating spaces for independent reading and writing; relevant literacy mini-lessons; space for literacy workshopping; and student sharing. See Table 2 for details.

The amount of time my students have for each segment varies and, I don't recommend a rigid lockstep approach. Depending on the day, the project, the conversations, and the collaborations, we will spend more or less time on each segment based on the needs

Table 2

*Sample Routine, Adapted from Creating Confident Writers: For High School, College, & Life, Hicks and Schoenborn (2020), p.30*

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
<b>Opening</b>	Spoken Word	Daily Poem	Daily Poem	Daily Poem	Featured Poet
<b>Segment 1</b>	Independent Reading	Independent Writing	Independent Reading	Independent Writing	Independent Reading
<b>Segment 2</b>	Mini-lesson	Student sharing	Mini-lesson	Student sharing	Mini-lesson
<b>Segment 3</b>	Workshop time	Mini-lesson	Workshop time	Mini-lesson	Workshop time
<b>Closing</b>	Student sharing	Workshop time	Student sharing	Workshop time	Student sharing

of my learners. However, as a general rule of thumb, it is helpful to be cognizant of time allocations, but not be bound by them. My current teaching schedule allows for 40-minute class periods divided up in approximately the following way: Poem (5 minutes), Independent Reading/Writing (5 minutes), Mini-lesson (3-5 minutes), Student sharing (3-5 minutes), and Workshop time (20 minutes). When my teaching schedule afforded me 72-minute class periods, the time distributions were as follows: Poem (5 minutes), Independent Reading/Writing (15 minutes), Mini-lesson (5-8 minutes), Student sharing (5-8 minutes), and Workshop time (40 minutes).

Literacy independence is centered in my classroom routine, and the workshop lessons that follow are guided by personal student inquiry, learner autonomy, and in-process personalized mini-lessons. There is no doubt who is the focus of the classroom here—it is the students.

### **An English Class Anchored in Independence**

Independent reading, independent writing, and workshop time are non-negotiables in the daily routine that help students reconnect with the English classroom. Some flexibility is used, however, with mini-lessons and student sharing sometimes taking more time during a workshop process. The case for independent reading with a classroom library of diverse books and a students' freedom to choose is well-established by teacher-leaders such as Beers and Probst (2017), Gallagher and Kittle (2018), Hammond (2014), Miller and Sharp (2018), and Bishop (1990). The case for independent writing for pleasure and a students' freedom to choose which pieces are shared with classmates, teachers, and community is also recognized by teacher-writers including Applebee and Langer (2013), Elbow (1998), Graves (1983), Romano (2000), and Ferguson and Young (2020). Furthermore, the case for a writing workshop pedagogy in the secondary classroom is affirmed by teacher-researchers like Chavez (2021), Elbow and Belanoff (1989), Gallagher (2011), Hicks (2009), and Kittle (2008).

These literacy mentors—among dozens of other voices—have guided my thinking about when, why,

and how students can be invited to read, write, and enter into a process of personal literacy. Creating intentional spaces for literacy independence along with a writing workshop process develops and sustains healthy reading and writing identities and, therefore, have—along with poetry—become non-negotiables in my classroom.

### **A Case for Poetry**

For seven years now, I have used poems as a way to meet multiple goals in my classroom, some of them instructional, yet most of them about building a community of readers and writers. There are many reasons that poems work well:

#### *Poems are Tone Setters*

Starting each class with a poem settles students into the day. In the early moments of class, we take time to put ourselves in “airplane mode” and briefly reconnect with self, others, and ideas. VanDerwater (2017) acknowledges that “Poems wake us up, keep us company, and remind us that our world is big and small. And too, poems teach us how to write. Anything.” Our students are busy (aren't we all) and taking a brief moment every day to simply listen and appreciate words is a brief and welcomed pause in the day.

#### *Poems Support Social and Emotional Learning*

At the center of the “CASEL wheel” framework are five core social and emotional competencies: “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.). Of these core competencies, self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management stand out as components found in the experience of a poem. In support of SEL, “Poetry brings out what's hidden and that which has gone unnoticed, disregarded, or deprived of respect. Peer behind the curtain and you might find that there's magic taking place” (Vecchione, 2020). That “magic taking place” is a connectedness students feel with self, society, community, and classroom culture.

#### *Poems are Multimodal Texts*

Ball, Sheppard, and Arola (2018) argue that multimodal

texts are comprised of five modes: linguistic, visual, aural, spatial, and gestural. Poetry lands firmly in each of these modes. The five different modes of poetry include:

- the linguistic mode, which “includes word choice, the delivery of written or spoken text, the organization of words;”
- the visual mode, which “includes color, layout, style, size and perspective;”
- the aural mode, which “is focused on sound including, but not limited to, music, sound effects, ambient noises, silence, tone of voice in spoken language, volume of sound, emphasis and accent;”
- the spatial mode, which “is about the physical arrangement, organization and proximity of the text;” and
- the gestural mode, which is most noticeable in spoken word poetry and includes “facial expressions, hand gestures, body language and interaction between people” (writer/designer, 2018).

In their small spaces, poems may seem superfluous, yet, multimodalities emerge in the mere experience of a poem.

### **Authentic Engagement Disrupts Negative Literacy Identities**

With our daily routines established, we proceed to disrupt negative literacy identities by inviting students to read what they want, encouraging them to write what they want, and celebrating the small and significant gains they make in a public manner. I contend that a disconnect between real-world literacy and school-guided literacy exists because the literacy students encounter in their own lives does not match the literacy they are expected to encounter in school. The counterintuitive nature of standards and benchmarks, the pressures of teacher evaluations, and the irrational grip on “must read” canonical texts hinders our students’ ability to connect to teacher, school, and, most importantly, the act of authentic engagement.

In her work, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the*

*Brain*, Hammond contends that “authentic engagement begins with remembering that we are wired to connect with one another” (p. 50, 2014). With the ever increasing expectations placed on teachers, it becomes easy to simply go through the motions in the name of “covering the curriculum.” We all know that establishing relationships is important for increased engagement and choosing to be your genuine self is a crucial step when connecting with students.

Though this looks different for every teacher, my students and I are in the habit of listening to poetry to begin each class, and we snap our fingers in appreciation of the words shared. We dedicate time to talk about books—what we like or don’t like, what we want to ditch or cannot wait to continue. We chat about graphic novels, novels-in-verse, poetry anthologies, podcasts, ebooks, novels, and other media that can pull us into a text. We learn to encourage one another by inviting students to share their words by featuring classroom poets and highlighting what we like about their pieces. The goal is to help students witness and build healthy relationships with the texts they read and the texts they write so they want to return to them again and again.

### **Authentic Engagement to Reach Reluctant Readers**

We know that engagement is crucial; this isn’t, however, always easy, especially with students who have learned to play “the game of school” (Fried, 2005). One student, I’ll call him Alec, had become so adept at “fake reading” that it took me a few months to realize he wasn’t really reading at all. It wasn’t until I noticed, through observation and conversation, that all the books he chose were required reads from middle school. When I asked him privately about it he said, “These are the only books in school I liked. Everything else is stupid. Besides, I hate reading because I just forget everything anyway.” Alec was being honest and he rejected every attempt I made to find the right book.

A few months later, I shared, as I often do, what my plans were for the weekend. On this day, I mentioned that my daughter’s birthday was coming up and she wanted to go to a local ComicCon where she could

cosplay her favorite video game character. A few students thought it was cool and we talked about comics, games, and movies a little longer than I had planned. Alec was one of the students who kept the conversation going with a focus on the manga series *Demon Slayer* (Gotouge, 2015). After all these months trying to “find the right book,” I learned that Alec was infatuated with this series, so I said, “I’ll be honest, I’m not that familiar with manga, do you have any of the books?”

“No,” he said, “I just watch them on Crunchyroll.”

I nudged a little further, “Would you like me to pick some up for the class?”

He started laughing, “Dude, *Demon Slayer* is *not* a school book—it literally has the words ‘demon’ and ‘slayer’ in the title.”

Challenge accepted. I was able to purchase the first four books in the series and, the next week, I said privately, “Hey, Alec, look what I found,” and I showed him the stack of books. Soon other manga fans gathered near and called dibs on the books.

From my perspective, it seemed that Alec—and I’m sure many other students—had learned that “school reading” and “real reading” were two different things. Without our candid conversations and a relationship that led to us talking about popular Japanese fiction, I have no doubt Alec would still be faking his way through reading. It turns out that, as the teacher, I didn’t need to find the right book; I needed to listen to student interests during our informal conversations and, unbeknownst to them, they would reveal their reading interests.

Students play “the game of school” most often when they are experiencing something out of their comfort zones. It is a risk-averse approach in which students choose the preservation of their comfort with a task over the perceived risk of that task. One way to encourage students to move outside of their comfort zones is to mitigate the perceived risk by eliminating preconceived notions of that task. In other words, work to

remove preconceived, and sometimes invisible, barriers to literacy pathways.

### **Authentic Engagement to Reach Reluctant Writers**

In addition to reading, writing is a stumbling block that many students have learned to avoid entirely. Let’s face it, writing is hard. It is a statement repeated by teacher-writers such as Ayres (2017), Chavez (2021), Hicks and Schoenborn (2020), Warner (2018), and many other writers. Yet, teachers often rely on five-paragraph writing formulas, contrived analogies about hamburgers, and rubricized cages that work to constrain the writer within a suitable measurement of success. By definition, it is “writing,” but in practice it isn’t writing at all. They are methods used to unintentionally reinforce writing as a skill that students either have or they don’t.

Though it isn’t true, the preconceived notion that you either have it, or you don’t works its way into the minds of many students. To combat that notion, I write with my students, talk about my writing struggles, ask for their insight on pieces, and involve them in my messy writing process. I find students are honest in their assessments of my writing. They are used to consuming media after all, and understand what it is to be an audience. I am grateful for their feedback and model how their feedback informs my writing. A role-reversal like this benefits both myself and my students. When I share my process, students are more willing to share their process, struggles, and ideas in one-on-one writing conferences.

But, these conversations don’t happen until students begin putting words on the page and independent writing helps start the ink flowing. Fletcher (2017) advises, “We don’t teach students to write so much as create a safe space where they can teach themselves by doing.” Writing with students, sharing your writing, asking for their feedback, and genuine appreciation and application of their feedback establishes a safe space for writing and for writers.

Safe spaces to write, however, are not always enough, and students need inspiration to write. To fire up the

muse, I share prompts from Donovan's *Ethical ELA Open Write* (Donovan, n.d.) on Tuesdays and Thursdays. These prompts offer models of writing, a process of writing, and an invitation to share writing. Yet, students are not bound by the prompts I share. Just like independent reading, I am more interested in students creating a relationship with their writing, which is why I end every writing invitation by saying, "I don't care what you write; I just care that you write creatively."

In the case of one student, who I'll call Kyran, these spaces for writing were unfamiliar. Instead of writing, she blurted out, "So, what do we do? Just write?"

I said, "Yup, that's all I'd like you to do for the next five minutes. You can start with a list of topics like I modeled or, if you have something else in mind you can begin there." As I wrote along with students—projecting my writing on the screen—I noticed that Kyran was dubious, but she decided to play along, at least at first.

About thirty seconds into our first independent writing time, Kyran blurted out again: "So, I can just write, 'blah, blah, blah, blah?'"

I said, "Sure, it's your writing, I don't mind." She laughed and said, "Okay, then, I'm just going to write a page full of 'blahs'." She chuckled again to herself and to a nearby friend and proceeded to fill her first page with the repetition of a single word: blah. To her it appeared as though I just didn't care, however, what I saw was a writer who was out of practice in relation to her own writing process.

Teachers can share writing practices; they can offer strategies; and they can bring others in to talk about their writing process. However, as Ayres (2017) puts it, this is not enough. She argues that "it isn't enough to read about writing. It isn't enough to listen to authors talk about their writing processes. These things are valuable, but they are not enough to entice writers. We must write and discover a process for ourselves" (p. 48). By writing for themselves, Kyran and her classmates were given a space to discover writers within

themselves that were not encumbered by grades or expectations.

The purpose of these independent encounters is to get students reading and writing—anything. Once they find their groove—albeit with bumps along the way—students who were thought to be behind socially, emotionally, and academically start to realize a change happening within them. They begin, slowly, to identify as readers and writers. Especially when they come up for air and see it for themselves.

### Getting Meta: Reflecting on a Semester of Growth

These daily routines and invitations, ultimately, lead to the metacognitive reflections found on Table 1. Over the course of a semester students can feel like they are holding their breath during a deep literacy dive. While in the process of reading and writing it is difficult for any of us to sense whether we are improving or not. Most times we don't recognize the beating of our heart unless we pause and check our pulse. It is at mid-term and end-of-term where we take a metacognitive pit stop. These are purposeful stops along the learning highway for students to stop, catch their breath, and consider what they have accomplished (or not) in the previous few weeks.

From a learning standpoint, it is healthy to check our pulses at predetermined intervals. At the end of every semester I ask students to pause, look back, and write a reflection about whether they are or are not meeting their personal literacy goals. It is a writing task critical in growing literacy identities during their learning journeys. Yancey (1998) reminds us: "as they learn, they witness their own learning [and] they show us how they learn" (p. 8). Students and teachers alike learn a lot from student self-reflection. Students learn how they learn and witness their own growth, and teachers learn how to better reach students.

### Understanding Realities and Overcoming Challenges

To better understand the literacy gains of my students, the mindsets shared by students in the introduction of this article bears repeating: "I'll tell you this, I hate

reading, I hate writing, and, if he tries to make me do either, I'll probably hate [you] too." A dire perspective, indeed. Whether accurate or not, student remarks such as this reflect their perceived realities in the ELA classroom. As teachers, we cannot control the spectrum of literacy experiences our students carry; however, understanding their perspective can guide our actions as teachers.

During a literacy prelection a student admitted he was "never taught by my parents how to read. I taught myself and the school helped, but not that well" (Crooms, 2021a). In another instance, a student reported "I just started watching TV with the caption[s] on at 5 [or] 6 and just learn[ed] words to read and how to write on my own" (Gantz, 2021). Yet another student divulged that "inside school I struggled because it was hard for me to read in front of people...it really affected the way the teachers looked at me." And "I've always struggled with writing and my teachers didn't try to make it better. Instead they made me feel bad about not being able to write like they expected me to meet their expectations, but it was hard when they didn't help me" (Baldrige, 2021). Common among these students is the lack of an adult who cares about their literacy needs as children, and the outcome has reverberations that last years. Though that may be true, all is not lost.

The challenges students face along their literacy journeys can be hard to read. However, instead of seeking a variety of interventions that would pull them from the classroom, I relied on creating intentional spaces where literacy habits and routines could be explored without the fear of judgment.

### **Trusting the Process and Supporting Students**

Most of my students stutter-started their way into the literacy habits in the classroom. Though five minutes of reading and writing time was on projected on the screen, students would often only achieve thirty- to sixty-seconds of actual reading/writing at the beginning of the year. It was challenging, to say the least, however I chose to intone Cameron (2016) and repeated that "progress, not perfection, is what we should be asking

of ourselves." I maintained our independent literacy spaces and sought genuine moments to acknowledge the joy of reading and writing I noticed in my students.

There were occasions when students were able to stay focused for a bit and I would say, "Did you notice that? We made it almost four minutes! When you are invested with your reading/writing the time just flies!" Other times, when I noticed a student struggling to stay focused, I would kneel down beside them and privately say, "You don't really like this book do you? Why don't you pick something else? Here, try *Wytches* (Snyder, 2015). Let me show you what drew me in." And sometimes, when students were engaged in their reading/writing, I would pause the online timer and let them linger with their words for a few more minutes to stretch their literacy stamina while witnessing them connect with words consumed or created.

### **Encountering Resistance and Invoking the Warm Demander**

Not every student progressed as much as I had hoped. One student admitted in their reading analysis that the "total pages I read this period is 0 because reading is not my thing." However, when prompted to offer an upcoming reading goal, they continued, "I haven't read a full chapter book once, and I might need small help to get into it" (Gonzales, 2022a). In this student's analysis lies the possibility of nurturing an ember of a positive literacy identity. It would appear that even in the darkness of a fading interest in books lies an ember of hope.

It's true that some students push back against a teacher's attempt to encourage literacy growth. Resisting attempts of teachers to help students better identify with their literacy is common among students who have not had positive ELA experiences. Yet, Hammond (2015) reminded me to be a "warm demander," in which "students interpret [a] mix of care and push as a sign that the teacher 'has his back'" (c.f., Cushman, 2005; Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Obidah & Teel, 2001). Being a warm demander helped build a rapport over time with the student who, in January, read zero pages "because reading [was not his] thing."



By March, with another reading analysis blog post under his belt, a genre-diverse classroom library, and a warm demander in his corner, he wrote:

I read a total of 144 pages this marking period which averages out to 20 pages per week. I read more than usual, because I usually never [read]. I would hate reading so much like I would avoid reading as best I can. [Now] I can read one good paragraph with a single breathe [*sic*] and it changed a lot in this marking period. I read the book *Wytches* by Scott Snyder. I love how there is way more art than reading. I can visualize more what happening then just reading figuring out what actually happening.” (Gonzales, 2021).

Although I wasn’t able to entice every student, I witnessed a remarkable turnaround in many students who learned, over the course of eighteen weeks, to embrace a regular process of independent reading and writing.

### **A Slow but Steady Climb**

By documenting their growth metacognitively, students observe for themselves the progress they are making. I acknowledge that individual student reflections vary and not all students experience the same results. Yet, a look at a series of one student’s reflective posts about reading demonstrates how she progressed as a reader over 24 weeks. Reading habits and identities take time but, like regular routines, they lead to growth—be it small or significant—as this student recounts.

In my first reflective post of the year I ask students to consider their literacy journey and, considering her experiences, this student wrote: “Nothing brought my interest to reading. I hate reading and writing. Me just sitting there doing nothing is boring to me. Reading is not something I like to do because I like to be active, not just sitting there” (Herron, 2021a). Eight weeks later the same student reflected on her reading and her identity as a reader was beginning to change: “I get most of my reading done in school in Andy’s class. I don’t really have a goal on reading because I don’t really like reading but I have found it easier to just listen to a book instead of reading it because then I can listen

and also work at the same time as reading” (Herron, 2021b). With one semester under her belt and another eight weeks, the same student had much more to say and it reflected on her growing identity as a reader:

I read about 15 minutes a day [which is] about [one] chapter a day. [In my] last writing that I did on reading I was listening to podcasts. But now I finally found a book that I actually like, so I’m reading pages now instead of listening to people talk. Not only that, [but] when I was listening to the podcast I wasn’t really remembering it. But, as I actually read, I’m remembering more now. I get most of my reading done at school. Some of my goals for reading are to read more often instead of just once a day in class. Ever since I actually found a book that I like, I have been wanting to read more and more often (Herron, 2022).

While I agree that this student needs to revise her writing, this is clearly a self-identified non-reader who has begun to identify as a reader. And, based on other reflective blog posts, she is not alone.

### **What a Reflective Literacy Analysis Reveals about Reading**

Maybe it’s the English teacher in me but, when it comes to learning from students, I find less value in quantitative data than I do in stories found in qualitative data. To better understand a students’ perception of growth, I am interested in what they are observing about their own learning. It is in their reflective blog posts assigned at mid-term and at the end-of-term that students reveal their progress and growth as readers and writers. It is also a place where students can assess their own goals, practice positive self-talk regarding literacy, and consider new literacy goals.

Though there is not space to share portions of every students reading analysis, the following reflections offer a window into the growth these students experienced. One student recalled that they read a total of 568 pages this marking period:

I would say I read at least 63 pages per week. Yes,

it is more than what I usually read. I used to read only one page when I was given time in class to read, because I never liked reading. I can read at least three or four pages within the time that [my teacher] gives us to read. It has changed a lot since last year because now I can actually tolerate reading and not complain [about it] (Salvador, 2021).

Another student shared that they read 453 pages and about 50 pages per week: “The amount of books I’ve read this marking period is 13.5 more pages per week than last time. I have learned that I can accomplish a lot though reading. I have also learned that when I put my mind to something I can usually accomplish that goal” (Kessinger, 2022). And yet another student revealed that: “this marking period I read a total of 462 pages and I read about 51 pages per week. I feel like it should have been more but I think I can get better at reading by next year or even by the end of the school year” (Zeitz, 2022).

Student reflections about their reading encouraged me. It seemed as though the research about independent reading was replicable, and I was happy to witness students growing as readers even though, through their own admission, they “hated reading.” I attribute this remarkable change to creating spaces to read, expanding the notion of a text to include poetry anthologies, graphic novels, YA books, fan fiction, and encouraging relationships between students and books of their choice.

Developing writing identities, on the other hand, is another challenge entirely. Instead of consuming media and conversing about it, writing requires the creation of media in consideration of an audience who may very well critique the results.

### **What a Reflective Literacy Analysis Reveals about Writing**

In his work, *Why They Can't Write*, Warner (2018) states that “writing knowledge is built through a combination of study, experience, and reflection;” and he adds, “to build writing knowledge, students must act as writers do. They must engage with all dimensions of the

writer’s practice” (p. 26). The teaching of writing takes time and, often, both teachers and students are eager to move quickly to the end. But, what might happen if teachers encourage students to linger for a bit? The habit of mind, metacognition, found in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al, 2011) is a part of a process of writing that seems like something extra that is easy to brush off. However, I argue that metacognition is at the heart of developing positive writing identities.

Again, though there is not space to share portions of every student’s writing analysis, the following reflections offer a window into the growth these students experienced. Considering their progress as a writer a student said:

I became a better writer because [my teacher] believed in me. I would have never been able to do it without his help. He helped me to believe in myself [and] for me to open a pathway for me to be myself. He told me never let [anyone] tell you how to be yourself. The main reason I achieved my goal of becoming a better writer [is] because I have written more in this class than I have written my entire life” (Crooms, 2021b).

Another student confirmed that they: “realized that I have not only come a long way, but I really am a better writer than I thought I was at the beginning of the year. I have come a long way from where I was when I started here. I am very proud of myself and I can’t wait to show the people who doubted me that I can do it” (Ladosinski, 2021). And this student found a reading/writing connection as they reflected on the semester: I believe that I found my greatest strength in writing and, I don’t mean just my poems, I mean in general and I feel like I am writing better because I read a lot of books throughout the semester. I think that I am becoming a better writer and creative thinker, I think that I am starting to come up with creative writing ideas I never knew I could think of” (Hilyard, 2021).

My students continue to teach me that when they write about topics they care about in *authentic* ways they find

themselves growing as writers in *unexpected* ways. From my students I learn that when teachers create spaces for independent writing they also create an increased sense of investment, affirmation, and joy associated with writing.

By choosing to ask students to personally reflect on their literacy, they don't just receive a number or a grade that only tells them how they are growing compared to someone else's goals, but they are able to internalize their learning based on their own personal goals. This metacognitive approach is one that helps students to see themselves as readers and writers which is promising because they no longer view literacy as "doing school," but view their approaches to literacy as something they enjoy and is applicable to their lives.

### Scaling Mountains, Together

Writers understand writers. We do more than "get" each other, we recognize the emotional lifts, drops, and stagnation that writing can produce. During independent writing, I write with my students. Sometimes I follow the prompt, sometimes I don't. Sometimes I talk about what I've written, sometimes not. Sometimes, as in the case of this piece, I share with students and seek their input, feedback, and advice. We are all writers in my classroom. This is not merely a pedagogical design, it is a reality that encourages students to experience what writing looks and feels like. Ayres (2017) captures why teaching writing isn't enough, she believes teachers of writers need to be writing themselves:

When teachers write, we give our students a gift. Suddenly they have a living, breathing writer in the room—someone who understands that writers have rocky days, who knows the difficulty of cutting words during revision, who appreciates the importance of feedback. When teachers write, we stop creating assignments and begin cultivating a community. Writers thrive when surrounded by people who write (Ayres, 2017, p. 48).

In that spirit, I ask my writers to select pieces they want to move beyond the classroom walls. Once a marking period students are encouraged to choose, revise/edit,

and share a creative writing piece that surprised them. These pieces are typically full of emotion and well-written because they are given the autonomy to select what is shared. Some of these pieces are really impressive and I invite students to share their work a little more publicly by becoming a "Featured Poet." I show students [livewrite.weebly.com](http://livewrite.weebly.com)—where I house featured poets in my classroom—and encourage them to read their work aloud to the class.

Although many students would prefer me to read their pieces, I nudge them to see if they might add their voice to the room and get a few takers. Featured Poet Fridays are celebrations of students, their words, their process, and we honor them with snaps, claps, and general huzzahs! Positive vibes only.

When the semester comes to a close. I host a read-around of student-selected works. We gather in a circle and each share at least one piece we're proud of. I join in as well with my own work. We take turns giving positive feedback and telling each writer what resonated with us. It is an event filled with surprise, joy, and celebration. At the conclusion of our first read around, one student said, "I wish we did this more often. It helps us to get to know each other better and, in some ways, it's therapeutic but it's still really fun." I couldn't agree more.

We look for common threads and themes that might act as chapters for an anthology of poetry. As writers, we make hard decisions about which pieces will make it into the anthology and which pieces don't seem to fit the agreed upon themes. The pieces are then curated into an e-book of their collective work, parental/guardian permissions are secured, and the anthology is printed out. The agreed upon title for this group was "Scaling Mountains" because, as one student put it "No one ever thought we could do this. For us, school has been like the mountain on the cover and we are that little person you can barely see. Sometimes we feel forgotten, but just look at what we did!"

Students were amazed by their anthology, *Scaling Mountains: Using Writing Footholds to Find Our Voice*,

## Scaling Mountains:

### Using Writing Footholds to Find Our Voice



Photo by Massimiliano Morosinotto on Unsplash

Clare Pioneer Creative Writing 2020-2021

and we made it available for the entire world to see: [cutt.ly/oPA25qX](https://cutt.ly/oPA25qX). To take their work a step further, I shared the anthology with teachers, counselors, and administrators and the students were invited to share their work and recite their words during a School Board meeting. See the slidedeck: [cutt.ly/SPA9BDX](https://cutt.ly/SPA9BDX).

My alternative education students were nervous. I was nervous. I was not so sure AP or Honors students would have been so eager to share their words and vulnerabilities with a room full of adults during a School Board meeting nonetheless. But, these students—the ones who, remember, hated reading, writing, and speaking—gathered their courage, shared their writing processes, and bravely entered the spotlight to shine as brightly as their words did that evening.

After our time to speak concluded, students were encouraged with applause, ovations, hugs, and even a few tears. One participant shared what everyone else was thinking when he said to the students, “Without a doubt, this was the most moving display of student work I have witnessed in the last ten years of attending School Board meetings. On behalf of those gathered here today,



Photo Credits: Andy Schoenborn (upper left) and Cathy Wirth (bottom right)

I would like to share our appreciation for sharing your hearts, vulnerability, and your words with us this evening.” There is no grade more powerful than the genuine recognition of an authentic audience. Especially in light of the perceptions of students’ literacy selves in which they had to overcome in order to be brave enough to set foot in a School Board meeting, let alone share their words. It was a moment I will never forget.

### It’s All a Matter of Process

There is no magic wand. I am a lot like you and my students are a lot like yours. They are equally funny and frustrating; brilliant and baffling; and amazing and argumentative. They are human. They are also readers and writers who may not see themselves in that light, yet.

I believe a love of literacy comes from within. It is already housed inside of us and fear is the lock that keeps it trapped. Fear of rejection. Fear of assessment. Fear of an unfamiliar genre. Fear of vulnerability. Fear of our own success. Yet, literacy comes from within. It rests in the experiences, observations, and encounters we have had and is released when we tell our truths without reservation in a space that is welcoming, encouraging, and, dare I say, fun. I have come to the conclusion that a process of learning and growing together as readers and writers is the spark that lights a literacy flame within each of us.

## References

- Applebee, A. N., & Langer, J. A. (2013). *Writing instruction that works: Proven methods for middle and high school classrooms*. Teachers College Press.
- Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.
- Ayres, R. (2017). *Enticing hard-to-reach writers*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Ball, C. E., Sheppard, J., & Arola, K. L. (2018). *Writer/designer* (2nd ed.). Bedford/St. Martin’s.
- Beers, K., & Probst, R. E. (2017). *Disrupting thinking: Why how we read matters*. Scholastic.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and using books for the classroom*, 6(3). ix-xi.
- Burke, J. (2003). *Writing reminders: Tools, tips, and techniques*. Heinemann.
- Burke, J. (2012). *The English teacher’s companion, fourth edition: A completely new guide to classroom, curriculum, and the profession* (4th ed.). Heinemann.
- Cameron, J. (2016). *The artist’s way: 25th anniversary edition*. TarcherPerigee.
- Chavez, F. R. (2021). *The anti-racist writing workshop: How to decolonize the creative classroom*. Haymarket Books.
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). *Fundamentals of SEL*. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>
- Comber, B., Woods, A., & Grant, H. (2017). Literacy and imagination: Finding space in a crowded curriculum. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(1), 115–120.
- Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, & National Writing Project. (2011, January). *Framework for success in postsecondary writing*. <http://wpacouncil.org/framework/>
- Cushman, K. (2005). *Sent to the principal: Students talk about making high schools better*. Next Generation Press.
- Donovan, S. J. (n.d.). The open write for educators. *Ethical ELA*. <https://www.ethicalela.com/openwrite/>
- Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2010). *What a coach can teach a teacher: Lessons urban schools can learn from a successful sports program*. Peter Lang.
- Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing without teachers* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Elbow, P., & Belanoff, P. (1989). *Sharing and responding*. Random House.
- Falk, D. (1995). Preflection: A strategy for enhancing reflection. *National Society for Experiential Education Quarterly*, (22).13.
- Fletcher, R. (2017). *Joy write: Cultivating high-impact, low-stakes writing*. Heinemann.
- Fried, R. L. (2005). *The game of school: Why we all play it, how it hurts kids, and what it will take to change it*. Jossey-Bass.
- Gallagher, K. (2006). *Teaching adolescent writers*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Gallagher, K. (2011). *Write like this: Teaching real-world writing through modeling and mentor texts*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Gallagher, K., & Kittle, P. (2018). *180 days: Two teachers and the quest to engage and empower adolescents*. Heinemann.
- Gotouge, K. (2018). *Demon slayer: Kimetsu no yaiba, Vol. 1* (Illustrated edition). VIZ Media LLC.
- Graves, D. H. (1983). *Writing: teachers and children at work*. Heinemann.
- Hammond, Z. L. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.
- Hicks, T. (2009). *The digital writing workshop*. Heinemann.
- Hicks, T., & Schoenborn, A. (2020). *Creating confident writers: For high school, college, and life*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- International Literacy Association. (n.d.). *Engagement and adolescent literacy [Position statement and research brief]*. <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-engagement-and-adolescent-literacy.pdf>
- Kittle, P. (2008). *Write beside them: Risk, voice, and clarity in high school writing*. Heinemann.
- Kittle, P., & Gallagher, K. (2021). *4 essential studies: Beliefs and practices to reclaim student agency*. Heinemann.
- Marchetti, A., & O’Dell, R. (2015). *Writing with mentors: How to reach every writer in the room using current, engaging mentor texts*. Heinemann.
- McKay, L., & Dean, L. (2017). Powering up students to challenge their own deficit views. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 61(3), 257–266.
- Miller, D., & Sharp, C. (2018). *Game changer! Book access for all kids*. Scholastic.
- Obidah, J. E., & Teel, K. M. (2000). *Because of the kids: Facing racial and cultural differences in schools*. Teachers College Press.
- Romano, T. (2000). *Blending genre, altering style: Writing multigenre papers*. Boynton/Cook.
- Snyder, S. (2015). *Wytches, vol. 1* (Illustrated edition). Image Comics.
- VanDerwater, A. L. (2017). *Poems are teachers: How studying poetry strengthens writing in all genres*. Heinemann.
- Vecchione, P. (2020). *My shouting, shattered, whispering voice: A guide to writing poetry and speaking your truth*. Seven Stories Press.
- Warner, J. (2018). *Why they can’t write: Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Yancey, K. (1998). *Reflection in the writing classroom*. Utah State University Press.
- Young, R., & Ferguson, F. (2020). *Writing for pleasure*. Routledge.

## Student Reflections

- Baldrige, C. (2021, September 14). Blog Post #1: My literacy journeys. *Elä*. [https://crbald.edublogs.org/2021/09/14/\\_trashed/](https://crbald.edublogs.org/2021/09/14/_trashed/)
- Crooms, D. (2021, November 17). Blog Post #1: My Literacy Journey. *English Language Arts*. <https://dcrooms.edublogs.org/2021/11/17/blog-post-1-my-literacy-journey/>
- Crooms, D. (2021b, December 14). Blog Post #7: Reflective Final Exam. *English Language Arts*. <https://dcrooms.edublogs.org/2021/12/14/blog-post-7-reflective-final-exam/>
- Gantz, A. (2021, September 10). Blog Post #1: My Literacy Journey. *English Language Arts*. <https://akgantz.edublogs.org/2021/09/10/blog-post-1-my-literacy-journey/>
- Gonzales, J. (2022a, January 7). Blog Post #5: MP2 Reading Analysis. *English Language Arts*. <https://liloeankid.edublogs.org/2022/01/07/blog-post-5-mp2-reading-analysis/>
- Gonzales, J. (2022b, March 18). MP3 Reading Analysis. *English Language Arts*. <https://liloeankid.edublogs.org/2022/03/18/mp3-reading-analysis/>
- Herron, T. (2021a, September 17). Blog Post #1: My Literacy Journey. *English Language Arts*. <https://trherron.edublogs.org/2021/09/17/blog-post-1-my-literacy-journey/>
- Herron, T. (2021b, October 18). Blog post #2 – *English Language Arts*. *English Language Arts*. <https://trherron.edublogs.org/2021/10/18/blog-post-3/>
- Herron, T. (2022, February 14). Blog post #9. *English Language Arts*. <https://trherron.edublogs.org/2022/02/14/blog-post-9/>
- Hilyard, R. (2021) Blog post#7: Exam. *ELA*. <https://rhilyar.edublogs.org/2021/12/17/blog-post7-exam/>
- Kessinger, H. (2022, March 2). Reading Analysis BP 10. *English Language Arts*. <https://hbkessin.edublogs.org/2022/03/02/reading-analysis-bp-10/>









- Ladosinski, K. (2022, January 24). Untitled. *English Language Arts*. <https://kladosinsky7.edublogs.org/2022/01/24/44/>
- Salvador, M. (2021, October 18). Blog Post #3: MP1 Reading Analysis. *English Language Arts*. <https://masalvad.edublogs.org/2021/10/18/blog-post-3-mp1-reading-analysis/>
- Zeitz, M. (2022, March 4). Mp3 Reading Analysis. *English*. <https://mlzeitz.edublogs.org/2022/03/04/mp3-reading-analysis/>

## Author Biography

**Andy Schoenborn** is an award-winning author and high school English teacher in Michigan at Clare Public Schools. He focuses his work on progressive literacy methods including student-centered critical thinking, digital collaboration, and professional development. He is a past-president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, Vice President for the Michigan Reading Association, and Teacher Consultant for the Chippewa River Writing Project. Contact him at <aschoenborn76@gmail.com>.



## Appendix

Metacognitive Arc for a Semester or Trimester			
Preflection (Week 1)	Mid-Term Progress (Week 6 or 9)	End-Term Progress (Week 12 or 18)	Final Reflection (Week 12 or 18)
<b>My ELA Journey</b> 	<b>MP1 Creative Writing</b>   <b>MP1 Reading Analysis</b>   <b>MP1 Growth Territories</b> 	<b>MP2 Creative Writing</b>   <b>MP2 Reading Analysis</b>   <b>MP2 Growth Territories</b> 	<b>Reflective Final Exam</b> 

Appendix 1 adapted from *Creating Confident Writers: For High School, College, & Life*, Hicks and Schoenborn (2020)

## I See You

I see you, teachers,  
bringing yourself to your students.

I see you, out there,  
unshielded,  
taking down walls,  
breaking barriers,  
and sharing pieces of yourself.

I see you, April,  
in your words,  
your wisdom, and  
your wit. You amaze.  
You inspire. Thank you.

I see you, Ernest,  
celebrating life,  
celebrating learning, and  
celebrating others. You embolden.  
You spark. Thank you.

I see you, Melissa,  
taking in Washington D.C.,  
with your ribbon dress, and  
sharing beautiful words. You shine.  
You impress. Thank you.

I see you, Nell,  
sharing your words,  
through research and scholarship,  
in nurturing others. You hearten.  
You motivate. Thank you.

I see you, Michael,  
traveling from Texas and  
lending your knowledge  
of the page, for us. You influence.  
You shine. Thank you.

I see you all,  
Sharif and  
Noor and  
Troy and  
Robert and  
Jill and  
Quan and  
Megan and  
Corinne and  
Lucia and  
Jeremy and  
Jes and

Owen and  
Kristy and  
Lyndsay and  
Jeanette and  
Jamarria and  
Aaron and  
Sean and  
Kente and  
Robin and  
Dionna and  
Carlin and  
Raven and  
Catherine and  
I see you, Zuri,  
who at the age of six  
shares her joy of reading with  
teachers wanting to learn from you!

For all those named  
and those I missed,  
I see you all.

Unshielded,  
taking down walls,  
breaking barriers,  
and sharing pieces of yourself.

I see you, teachers.

Bringing yourself to your students -  
I see you.

And, I see you, Leah,  
creating spaces to gather,  
inviting others to be brave,  
speaking to the teacher heart  
in each of us, leading the way,  
encouraging us to embrace our  
own sense of possibility.

Thank you,  
thank you,  
thank you,  
a million times,  
thank you for showing  
us how to stretch our wings,  
so we too might believe  
we can fly.