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Critical Paper

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Short and Sweet: Why Short-Form Prose is Essential in High School English Classrooms

How would most Americans describe the kinds of reading and writing they did in their high school English classes? While there would certainly be some diversity in the responses, most people probably recall reading several whole books throughout the year and writing substantial essays about each one (and if their experience was anything like mine, those essays were probably heavily formulaic, three-point enumeration essays). They may have also read some short stories, plays, and poetry here and there. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, adopted by 42 states since 2010, emphasize exposing students to a wide variety of texts and having them write for a variety of purposes. One of the standards specifically addresses "Range of Writing," stating that students should "write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences" (corestandards.org). However, despite the flexibility afforded by these standards, many high school English teachers do not embrace the opportunity to teach with a variety of shorter texts or have students write shorter pieces. Incorporating short-form prose in the high school English classroom not only breaks up the monotony of reading book after book--it also gives students practice with a genre of writing that provides them with an outlet for expression and helps them gain essential communication skills.

While short stories and poetry have traditionally been included in high school English instruction, “short-form prose” is a different kind of writing that is typically absent. The form has been around for centuries with rich traditions present all over the world, but since it can vary so widely, many scholars and writers have trouble defining what exactly short-form writing includes. In his introduction to the anthology *Short*, Alan Zeigler writes,

If the subtitle for this book contained even a partial list of nomenclature for short prose forms, it might include:

Anecdotes, Aphorisms, Briefs, Brief Essays, *Casos*, *Crônicas/Chronicas*, *Denkbilder*, Espresso Stories, Feuilletons, *Ficciones Relámpagos*, Figures, Flash Fiction, Fragments, *Greguerías*, Hint Fiction, *Kurzprosa*, Maxims, Microstories/*Microcuentos*, Monostichs, Nanofiction, Napkin Stories, Notes, Paragraphs, *Pensées/Pensieri*, Prose Poems, Quick Fiction, Sentences, Shorts, Short-Short Stories, Situations, Sketches, Sudden Fiction, Tableaus, Transmutations, Tropisms, Utterances, Very Short Stories

This ambiguity could be partially to blame for short-form prose being mostly absent from high school English curriculum--it can be intimidating to teach material when it is not clearly defined and easily explainable. However, this should not discourage teachers from incorporating short-form writing and reading in the classroom, since the value of the experience for students will far outweigh any initial confusion they (or teachers!) have about the genre.

The Common Core Standards for English Language Arts clearly encourage teachers to vary the types of texts that students are reading and writing. In addition to the Range of Writing standard mentioned earlier, other more specific standards address the need for students to encounter texts other than novels, plays, short stories and poems in their English

classrooms. While almost every English Language Arts standard could be addressed using short-form prose, there are many standards for which the form is especially useful. For example, standard RL.11-12.1 states that students should be able to draw inferences “from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain” (corestandards.org). Since short-form prose writers often use suspense as a narrative technique, students could easily practice this skill, analyzing how the author builds tension and what readers should infer from that tension. Short-form prose also tends to have creative story structure, with authors finding interesting ways to condense the narrative or tell a “larger” story in a short amount of words. This lends itself well to standard RL.11-12.5, which asks students to “analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact” (corestandards.org). When students create short-form prose themselves, they can work toward mastery of standard W.11-12.3.D: “use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of experiences, events, setting, and/or characters” (corestandards.org). Examining these few standards in detail make it clear that there is a place for short-form writing in the high school English classroom and that the form is well-suited to help students master the analysis and writing skills they will need in college and their future workplaces.

While addressing standards is important, the benefits of incorporating the short form in English classrooms goes far beyond just meeting a teaching requirement. The formulaic writing that many high school students have become accustomed to does not help them become better writers. They just learn the structure by heart, figure out how to fill in the blanks and never think about how they could do writing any differently. This results in many students getting a harsh wakeup call when they go to college or the workplace and are expected to generate writing that does not fit neatly into a mold. Giving students access to

short-form writing and helping them learn to generate ideas without a template will give them the confidence they need to write in any situation, not just in a five-paragraph response to something they have read. Short-form prose also requires students to make tough decisions about their content. Since they are not writing as much, they must boil their ideas down to the essentials, eliminating the fluff that tends to make its way into student writing when they have a word count to meet. Learning to write with brevity and conciseness will help students master the kinds of writing that most of them will actually use in the workplace, preparing them to be more efficient and successful communicators.

The other benefit of short-form prose for students is that it provides them with an outlet for expression. Many students are intimidated by writing, often because they are not good at the type of writing they have been exposed to at school, which is mostly in response to literature. It is important for English teachers to help students realize that just because they are not expert analytical essay writers does not mean that they cannot be good at or enjoy writing. While a student may be daunted by a longer writing assignment, asking a student to write a one-sentence response to something they have read or a one-sentence story may help them overcome their insecurities and gain confidence as a writer. In fact, most students are already writing in short-form prose regularly on social media, such as Twitter and Snapchat. Connecting the communication they use all day every day to “real” writing breaks down the artificial barriers that students (and sometimes teachers) create between the things they learn in school and the things they do in life. In a New York Times opinion piece about flash fiction, Grant Faulkner writes that “evocative, fragmentary brevity makes this Twitter and Facebook era perfect for flash fiction. Flash allows literature to be a part of our everyday life, even if we are strange multitasking creatures addled by a world that demands more, more, more” (Faulkner). Students who are introduced to short-form prose at school may even develop a

passion for the genre, and they will be in good company--the popularity of short forms has increased in recent years, and there are communities of writers dedicated to them. In a 2012 article in the London Evening Standard, flash fiction writer Tania Hershman said that "Flash fiction is taking off...one of the major international short story prizes, The Bridport Prize, added a 250-word contest last year, and there are more very short story contests and flash fiction magazines than ever before" (Evening Standard).

Teachers wishing to incorporate short-form prose in the classroom have practically endless options--the short form is so rich and varied that it can be overwhelming to find a place to start. Alan Zeigler's anthology *Short* provides hundreds of short-prose pieces from the Western tradition, spanning from the 1500s to the present day. The Eastern tradition is also rich with short-form prose, from Chinese proverbs to Zen Buddhist koans. Teachers looking for an easy way to start incorporating short-form writing could choose a piece of prose as an opening activity for class--perhaps a piece that is thematically related to the current unit of study. Students can read the piece and discuss it together, analyzing how it relates to the unit of study or what narrative tools the author uses in the writing. Teachers can also have students create their own short-form works as a response to a prompt or with their own ideas, perhaps even using short-form writing as a planning tool to help students pare down their ideas to the essentials before starting on a longer writing assignment.

While these general ideas provide a starting place for teachers, many educators have created detailed units on short-form writing, particularly Flash Fiction (which is probably the most popular and widely-recognized form of the genre). In a lesson plan posted on the New York Times Learning Network website, teachers Amanda Christy Brown and Katherine Schulten provide a valuable exercise for putting the short form in context for students. The beginning of the lesson asks students to read Ernest Hemingway's short, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

Students then consider whether they think this piece of writing is a story, then they think broadly about what a story is and discuss their ideas with the class. Brown and Schulten then provide several examples of short-form prose for students to read and analyze, questions for consideration, and prompts for students to create their own work. They also link to helpful resources for teachers who want to expand on the lesson plan and provide students with opportunities for publishing, including NPR's Three-Minute Fiction contest, The Guardian newspaper's "Flash Fiction By Kids, For Kids" section, and 100 Word Story, which includes both written and photo prompts to get students going.

Another helpful resource for teachers is Dr. Michael Arnzen's presentation "Less is More, More or Less: Teaching Flash Fiction Writing." Arnzen, of Seton Hill University, provides detailed information for teachers on why and how to teach flash fiction. Arnzen notes that teaching flash fiction has "literary value," it is "culturally relevant and timely", and the "content is more manageable" than more traditional forms of writing (Arnzen). He also provides several specific examples of how to incorporate it in the classroom, including ways to have students practice using multimedia tools to share their work. Writer Vergie Townsend's blog post "Teaching Flash Fiction to Developing Writers: Insights and Stories from Three Students and Their Professor," is another good read for teachers, in which Townsend goes into detail about her struggles and successes teaching flash fiction and provides examples of student work. Her explanation of flash fiction to her students is especially valuable:

You'll use the skills you learn in flash fiction throughout your lives. You'll use them to write college essays, or academic papers, and later when you write memos at work. You'll use them to write love letters or notes to your sick grandmother. Good writing skills open doors" (Townsend).

While novels, plays, short-stories and poems are valuable and essential aspects of English Language Instruction, short-form prose has much to offer teachers and students, and it is currently highly underutilized. Not only does this form offer an interesting new genre to explore and a new mode of creative expression for students, it allows them to practice analysis and composition in a less intimidating way. When reading short-form prose, students can examine the text more deeply since there is not as much content to get lost in--in other words, they can "go deep" rather than skim a lot of content shallowly--and when students write short-form prose, they can practice refining skills such as conciseness and brevity, which will improve their writing and make them better communicators in the future. Short-form prose not only has a place in the high school English classroom--it should become an essential aspect of instruction.

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