

Innovative Alternatives to the Traditional Essay

Essay writing is a cornerstone skill in any English Language Arts (ELA) class. As English teachers, we have experienced the evolution of writing strategies from the traditional five-paragraph essay to a writing workshop model and everything in between. This innovation in our content area carries on into current times as we seek newer and better methods to engage our students in their own writing while targeting the skills we want them to master, such as creating thesis statements organizing ideas, offering evidence, providing commentary, and using proper grammar. The traditional five-paragraph essay is not the only method we can employ to target these same writing skills; there are others with a more exciting twist for student interest. In this chapter, I share alternative options to the traditional essay to motivate our writers without sacrificing skills.

The Infographic Essay

The infographic essay can replace a traditional essay to support visual learners. These graphics offer a succinct way to represent information visually while targeting key writing skills. Assigning an infographic essay also enables students to learn about the basic principles of visual design and layout—relevant skills in today’s job market—alongside their analysis. According to Bowdon and Scott (2003), visuals paired with text create “enhanced student engagement” and allow for “the communication of enriched content” (41). Infographic essays can be

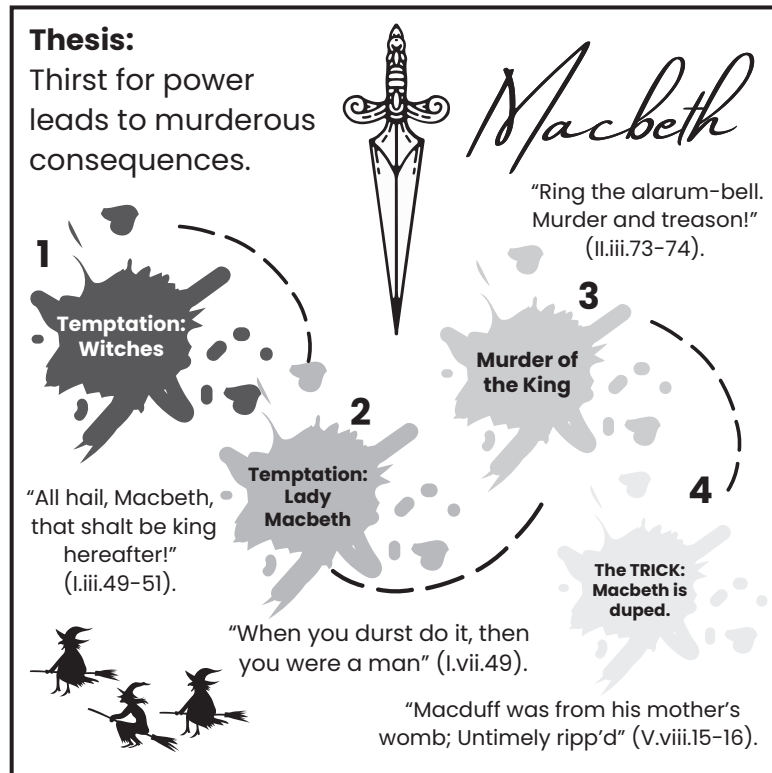


FIGURE 1.1 Infographic analyzing a key theme in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*.

tailored to a variety of essay types from literary analysis to persuasive messages. See Figure 1.1 for an example of a literary analysis infographic. This method fulfills the demands of curriculum standards but also the demand for students to gain a better understanding of the material through visual, creative expression as opposed to the traditional essay.

I've used infographics in so many ways in my classes. During a recent unit on Gothic literature, students created infographics to analyze gothic traits, using images and textual evidence to support an analytical thesis statement about how gothic traits create suspense and tension in a story. They used a template from Canva to construct their infographics and then presented them to small groups and put them on display around the classroom for a gallery walk activity. This approach helped them understand how the specific traits of a genre affect the reader's experience. As an extension, students can use the infographic as an

outline for a new essay. Thus, this approach can also act as a visual outline for planning a piece of writing.

However, there are various ways to use infographics across ELA grades and levels. Here are essay prompt options that work for using infographics to supplement or replace a conventional essay entirely.

- **Character Analysis**

- **Writing task.** Conduct an analysis of the protagonist's character development in a novel. Observe how the character changes from the beginning until the end. How does this character's change communicate the theme of the story? Create an infographic essay that answers this question.

- **Symbolism**

- **Writing task.** Select a symbol from a literary work. Examine how the symbol communicates the theme of the story. Communicate your analysis through an infographic.

- **Literary Devices**

- **Writing task.** Explain the use of a literary device in a text (e.g., metaphor, irony, foreshadowing) and how it contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole. Design an infographic to showcase your analysis.

- **Thematic Exploration**

- **Writing task.** Investigate a key theme of the text. Analyze how literary techniques and/or elements communicate this theme.

- **Historical and Cultural Context**

- **Writing task.** Investigate the historical and cultural context of a piece of literature and think about its impact on the story's main message. Use an infographic to explain your findings.

- **Author Study**

- **Writing task.** Investigate an author's life experiences and output of written work. Think about how his or her life events and beliefs influenced his or her body of work. Create an infographic that explores this connection.

These assignments, when transformed into infographics, encourage students to think analytically and creatively about how to represent their analysis using a combination of images and words, making the presentation of information and learning process more interesting and interactive.

Helpful Hint: Have students use QR codes on the infographic to link to related content. They can then use these external sites to learn more about the topic during a gallery walk. Students can also select an infographic from another student or group and use the rubric to assess it, providing feedback to the writer/creator on the strong points as well as areas for improvement.

The Infographic Essay Project targets essential skills in a much more succinct format than a full essay. For instance, we can check the thesis statement overall organization of ideas, and supporting evidence all through the context of an infographic. To add in assessment of commentary, students can present their infographics to the class and explain how each device or quotation supports the thesis statement. Students can also get creative with these, using specific colors to symbolize thematic topics in the text (e.g., a red border could represent murder or destruction and a skull could represent death). Encourage learners to experiment with templates from Canva to find the one that will best convey their ideas. That way, students can focus more on the content and less on the rules for creating an aesthetic layout. Using visuals like the infographic can help students “see” their writing path.

The Photo Essay

The Photo Essay presents another alternative to the traditional essay. This method of writing entails using the artistic form of photography to connect and convey analysis of a text. Students can either select photos or take their own original photos that connect to the main ideas, or what would be the body paragraphs of an essay, to support and prove a thesis statement. Once they have created their photo essays, students can

present their essays to the class, explain how the photographs relate to the text, and use textual evidence to prove their analysis. According to Serafini (2014), combining visual and textual elements in classroom projects fosters critical thinking and allows learners to engage with literature in dynamic, multimodal ways. This multimodal approach enables teachers to examine students' understanding and depth of analysis through their careful attention to how they relate the text to photography. Analyzing literature through photography can make the writing process more tangible and relatable to visual learners.

Instead of presenting their photo essays live to the whole class, students can record their analyses as a voiceover in an animated slideshow (like a film) and present their interpretations of a text in a visual and auditory way. When students create recordings of their presentations, other students can watch presentations asynchronously and fill out response guides. This strategy works well with both fiction and nonfiction texts in any unit of study.

Helpful Hint: Instead of relying on found images from the internet, prompt students to capture their own photographs. This added action not only pushes them to the next level of artistic expression but also encourages them to think more deeply about the text. It requires them to stage or find scenes that represent their analysis and take pictures that represent their interpretation.

Try out these prompts for literary analysis photo essays:

- Choose an important literary symbol and create a photo essay that examines its meaning and importance. Use direct quotes from the text to connect each photo with the symbol.
- Choose a complex character from a novel and represent his or her defining character traits through a set of images. Think about the character's background relationships, and internal conflicts. How does this character connect to each image, and what does each image say about the character? Include textual evidence to support claims and weave a narrative about the defining aspects of this character's life and personality.

- Establish a thematic interpretation of a text using visuals and textual evidence. Make a clear connection between the photographs and theme. What do the photos have to say about the theme? What evidence from the text supports the use of photos in establishing a thematic interpretation?

Try out these other prompts for nonfiction photo essays:

- Produce a photographic memoir. Chronicle a life-changing, personal event that affected you in a significant way, depicting it with visuals and words.
- Use your investigative skills to highlight a problem in your community and raise awareness about it. Support your findings with research from credible sources.
- What is your cultural heritage? Conduct research to find out more about your background. Then, present your findings through words and pictures.

Essentially, the Photo Essay Project provides students with a multimedia project that requires similar planning and depth of analysis as a traditional essay. Thesis statements, organization, research, evidence, and commentary are basic writing skills, and photo essays give students the chance to explore these skills through this creative medium. Today's learners will enter a workforce that demands they be proficient in a variety of media forms. According to Hobbs (2011), integrating multimedia projects into the classroom prepares students for the demands of the present workplace by teaching them to critically analyze and create media for various purposes. Thus, multimedia projects such as the photo essay enable instructors to teach important skills that are relevant beyond the classroom.

Of all the alternative writing assignments I've tried, the Photo Essay truly resonates with students. They get excited when they can make connections to photos and even more excited when they get to take their

own photos. By allowing students to be creative and make choices, they tend to engage with the assignment and the skills so much more. It's a win-win!

The Paragraph Portfolio

The Paragraph Portfolio Project involves creating a portfolio of paragraphs in lieu of one, long essay. The portfolio empowers students to sharpen writing skills while focusing on shorter pieces of writing that tend to be more accessible and far less intimidating than a lengthy essay. In fact, the Paragraph Portfolio Project serves as an effective strategy to help students build up the stamina to write full-length essays.

There are various approaches to constructing this portfolio project, but one effective method is for students to use their journals throughout the semester, building a collection of paragraph options to include in their final portfolio. Focus on giving journal prompts that require responses with textual evidence and commentary. This will give enough substance to start the writing process as learners compile their portfolios (Dobbs 2018). Example prompts include the following:

- What is the most defining characteristic of the main character? Explain with textual evidence.
- Predict what happens next in the story based on the reading thus far. Use textual evidence to support the prediction.
- How does the simile (or other device) create meaning in the passage? Explain with textual evidence.
- Find one symbol from the reading and explain what it means using textual evidence.
- Describe the tone of the passage. What is the tone and how does it affect the meaning? Explain with textual evidence.

After students have drafted a few paragraph journals, they can begin writing workshop mini lessons that target skills such as writing topic sentences, blending evidence, and crafting commentary. Give students time to workshop their paragraph drafts throughout the semester so that when it comes time to compile the entire portfolio at the end of the semester, they will have already completed editing and revision exercises on select paragraphs. Consider allowing them to choose which paragraphs to work on during writing workshop time and which paragraphs to submit in the final portfolio. Alternatively, strike a balance between student-selected paragraphs and teacher-selected paragraphs as best fits the needs of your students.

For submitting their paragraph portfolios, students can turn in a physical folder or create an online repository for them such as a Google folder or a built-in portfolio component of a learning management system such as Schoology. I prefer to give each student a file folder to turn in printed versions of their paragraphs because I find it easier to grade this way. However, we have printing capabilities at our school that others may not have, so online portfolios can work just as well.

When it comes to grading the portfolio, I find it less daunting and more manageable to audit each one instead of grading every single paragraph (Dobbs 2018). A portfolio audit enables me to hold students accountable without having to grade every piece of paper. But what is a “grade audit”? As teachers, we cannot grade every single piece of paper. There are too many of students and only one of us, which can lead to hours upon hours of grading written work. Instead, I audit the portfolio by requiring a set number of paragraphs (e.g., six to ten is a typical range), and their grade comes from two main components: completion of all paragraphs in the correct format and the quality of a small number of paragraphs (e.g., two to four is a usual amount). Essentially, this means that I only end up assessing between two and four paragraphs instead of reading all 6–10. I allow students to select some paragraphs for me to grade and then I select the others at random. This enables me

to maintain accountability without drowning in papers. Let me show you an example assignment breakdown of how this works:

- Students must include eight paragraphs (or however many you would like to assign) in the paragraph portfolio.
- Each paragraph should include a topic sentence, two to three pieces of textual evidence embedded into student writing, commentary or explanations of evidence, and a concluding sentence.
- Each paragraph should appear on its own page with its own MLA format and a Works Cited page.
- Students submit the eight paragraphs in a file folder and highlight and label the targeted writing skills mentioned above.
- Out of the eight paragraphs, I will grade four for quality and the rest for completion. Students select two of their best paragraphs for me to grade, and I select the other two paragraphs at random.
- Sixty percent of the grade comes from completing all eight paragraphs in proper MLA format. The other 40% of the grade comes from the quality of the four that I assess for targeted writing skills.

This forms the basis of audit grading. These numbers can be changed around depending on your student group. For instance, in an advanced class, I might require students to include 10 paragraphs in the portfolio and then assess 6 of the 10 for quality. For other classes, I might require six paragraphs, two for me to grade for quality and the rest for completion. It depends on the class and how best to meet student needs.

Each year, my students report that the Paragraph Portfolio Project taught them how to write. They appreciate that the paragraphs make writing workshop less intimidating and more approachable when working on specific writing skills. Thus, the Paragraph Portfolio Project has become a staple in my curriculum. Targeting skills in shorter chunks of writing helps build student confidence and encourages them to take more risks in their writing. It also prepares them to write longer,

more developed essays by ensuring that they have the paragraph-writing skills necessary to handle a more lengthy writing challenge (Dobbs 2018).

Flash Presentation

A Flash Presentation means fast. It consists of a concise and focused presentation format in which the presenter has 30 seconds to present each slide for a total of six slides, resulting in a presentation time of about three minutes. Note that times can be changed as needed to fit the assignment and the student group. This condensed format requires students to be clear, organized, and prepared when they present. It is ironic that by giving students more time to prepare can actually cause more procrastination and less organization. The same concept applies to writing, too. Sometimes, limiting the amount of writing can actually make for better writing because it forces the writer to strip down the message to its key points. According to Zinsser (2006), brevity and clarity are important skills in communication, helping students refine their thinking and focus on what truly matters. Time limits can do the same by helping them cut out the fluff and get to the heart of their message.

To use the Flash Presentation for assessing writing skills outside the context of an essay, teachers can require the following skills in the presentation for assessment:

- **Thesis statement.** Students begin their presentations with a clearly stated, focused thesis statement just like in a traditional essay.
- **Organization of ideas.** Then students arrange their concepts in a coherent sequence throughout the presentation. Each part should denote a specific point along with evidence that substantiates the thesis statement. This part of the presentation parallels the organizational skills one must use to write an effective essay.
- **Research and evidence.** Similar to an essay, students also need to support the thesis statement with evidence during the presentation.

They can select relevant quotes, data, and/or examples from the text or research to share, but writers must select focused chunks of text for the presentation given the time constraints. Using this strategy, students can't merely throw in a long passage just to take up space in an essay. They must focus in on precise words, phrases, and quotations that best support their claims.

- **Analysis and commentary.** Students can also explain how the evidence supports their thesis and what it reveals about other elements such as characters, conflicts, and symbols in the text. If it is a nonfiction presentation about an issue, students can use evidence from credible sources in lieu of literary elements. Again, because of the time limit, students need to come well-rehearsed and prepared to share their commentary in a clear and concise format. Similar to the commentary in an essay, this component presents analysis—just in a much shorter presentation style.
- **Concise writing.** The Flash Presentation format encourages students to be organized and prepared. They have only 30 seconds per slide, so they must simplify their analysis into its most essential parts. This brevity helps them practice being succinct while avoiding unnecessary filler information—another key skill in essay writing.

Helpful Hint: I set up a large digital stopwatch at the back of the room so that students can see it while they present. This helps them stay on time throughout the presentation. I do allow grace time, especially at first, but students get better at flash presentations the more they do them. And the more they do them, the more they like them because they are straight and to the point.

The Flash Presentation enables teachers to assess students in a fast and effective format while also checking for key writing skills. This technique can be used for both fiction and nonfiction texts. Whether students present a character analysis or an issue-based public service announcement, the Flash Presentation provides the means of delivering information quickly and efficiently, which works for anything we do in ELA.

Museum Artifact Presentation

The Museum Artifact Presentation gives students a tactile way to build critical thinking and writing skills. It is a way for learners to showcase analysis by making connections. For this presentation assignment, students choose an artifact that connects to a literary text and then explain how the artifact advances further understanding of literary elements and/or techniques such as themes, characters, or symbols. The artifacts assist students in brainstorming thematic topics, ultimately guiding them to craft a thematic thesis statement that connects the artifact to the literary work and uses it as a foundation for analysis. As Kelly Gallagher (2004) reminds us, when we engage students in innovative, hands-on activities, we give them the chance to be intellectually inquisitive, and as a result, they often surprise us with the insights they uncover. Sometimes, learners struggle with abstract ideas. This project helps students generate thematic topics by starting with tangible objects that they can hold in their hands and use as a guide to the big, universal, thematic ideas.

For example, in a novel study unit on *The Great Gatsby*, items could include a flapper dress, a golf club, a green light, a pair of eyeglasses, a string of pearls, a yellow toy car, a party invitation, a map of New York City and Long Island, and so on. Groups can work to analyze how each item connects to a thematic idea to inspire a thematic thesis statement. For instance, the thesis statement for the flapper dress might be something like: “The flapper dress, as an icon of the Jazz Age, serves as a symbol of the illusion of freedom and prosperity in *The Great Gatsby* and ultimately reflects the shallowness of Daisy Buchanan.” Consider these other artifacts for popular secondary texts:

- A red balloon for *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros
- An astronomy book for *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio
- A conch shell for *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding

- A crochet hook and yarn for *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan
- A small shovel for *Holes* by Louis Sachar
- A bow for *The Odyssey* by Homer
- A red apple for *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
- A letter for *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

Helpful Hint: Allow students to choose artifacts that speak to their interpretations of the text because student choice can increase engagement and motivation. Alternatively, consider having them create their own artifacts, or allow students to choose a few pieces to put on display in a literary museum. This project can be short and simple or more involved, depending on the curriculum and needs of a class.

The number of artifacts to require for this assignment can vary. Typically, I require students to present two to three artifacts that all connect to the same overall idea. Once students have selected their artifacts, they must explore how each one connects to the text by finding textual evidence to support a thematic connection. They also conduct research about each artifact to see if anything from the research helps to enlighten thematic meaning. For a flapper dress, students could investigate fashions from the 1920s, paying particular attention to the popularity of the flapper dress and its representation of free expression. Through research and textual evidence, students can begin to view the dress as a symbolic artifact representing both the illusion of freedom promised by the American Dream and the carefully curated facade it required. By integrating evidence into their presentations—from the text and other credible sources—students can enhance their ability to gather, evaluate, and integrate evidence to support a thematic claim.

As far as using this project to assess writing skills, consider having students turn in a developed outline of their artifact presentations.

The outline gives teachers a chance to assess the thesis statement, organization, use of evidence, and analysis. As students present, I follow along with the outline and check for targeted writing skills. The rest of the class can also assess presentations as they listen and evaluate the effectiveness of each overall argument.

Extensions and enrichment ideas for the Museum Artifact Project include the following:

- Construct a museum exhibit to put on display for the whole school in the library, hallway, or other community space.
- Focus on how different characters perceive the artifact to explore perspective.
- Use creativity to invent a backstory for the artifact to examine where it might have come from and how a character in the novel could have acquired it.
- Rework a scene in which the artifact changes the course of the novel.
- Create an original artifact, incorporating any pertinent details, colors, or symbols from the text that would signify the artifact's importance.
- Write a diary entry, letter, or monologue from the perspective of a character who reflects on the importance of the artifact.

Through various pathways and choices in the presentation of the Museum Artifact Project, teachers can guide students to explore the symbolism of artifacts, ensuring engagement with the material at an appropriately challenging level. According to Thomas C. Foster's (2014) book *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, "Everything is a symbol of something, it seems, until proven otherwise." Embracing the symbolic nature of artifacts encourages students to think critically about the deeper meanings within literature and the world around them.

Literary Quilt Project

The Literary Quilt Project presents another interactive and visual opportunity to analyze a literary work while sharpening both writing and critical thinking abilities. For this project, students can communicate their understanding of a literary work by creating a quilt (out of paper or fabric—or even online) that presents their analysis of a text. This process encourages both presenters and listeners to show their understanding of a text. Creating a story quilt requires collaboration as students share their interpretations of a text, decide what to put on the quilt, and learn from one another in the process. Working together to create a literary quilt for a text along with reviewing other group's quilts enable students to construct and deconstruct meaning, helping to solidify student analysis of how literature comments on life (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999).

At the beginning of the project, groups should spend time researching the history of quilt making. Different cultures throughout history have used quilts as narrative tools to record, life experiences and community events. For example, some historians believe that quilts were used in the Underground Railroad to communicate secret messages to enslaved individuals seeking freedom (National Park Service 2011). Another historical example of using quilts to convey messages was the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which began in 1987 as a gigantic quilt to memorialize those who had died from illnesses related to AIDS. Each square of the quilt was created by loved ones of a person who was lost to the AIDS epidemic (Bennington-Castro 2021). So, get students involved in researching more about the history of quilts. These examples can serve as inspiration for the Literary Quilt Project.

Quilts begin with a pattern, but to keep things simple in the initial stages of the project, students can begin by using individual squares to brainstorm ideas and to sketch out mock-ups before deciding on a

particular quilt pattern to use for the final project. Similar to a one-pager, students should aim to build a visual map of analysis based on a central idea. They should construct a thesis statement to use as the center square of the quilt and then include textual evidence, symbols character traits, plot points, conflicts, settings, and so forth to communicate the central theme. Groups can use any means of their choosing to create the individual squares to represent their visual interpretation of the theme. For instance, a student might create a dark and stormy square that represents the kind of turmoil that occurs in *Wuthering Heights*. Another student might create a colorful and vibrant quilt, square that connects to the pursued hopes and dreams of the Roaring Twenties embodied by the characters in *The Great Gatsby*. By constructing the quilt squares, students can make symbolic connections that lead to thematic analysis.

To create their quilts, groups can use construction paper, fabric, poster board, Canva, or any other material of their choice. This project encourages creative freedom, so think about letting students express their analysis in a creative format that they choose—from drawings to paintings to photographs to digital designs to actual sewing—because students love the chance to be creative when they can (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999).

In addition, teachers can extend the project by requiring additional written components such as square labels with textual evidence or a reflective essay at the end. These written components give students a chance to explain their projects and how they used elements such as colors, shapes, photos, graphics, text, and patterns to represent their literary analysis. Again, the activity enables students to make connections between the visual representation and the text in a manner that communicates literary interpretation and demonstrates effective communication. See Figure 1.2 for an example of the Literary Quilt Project.



FIGURE 1.2 Literary Quilt Project example.

To help focus the ideas of a group’s quilt project and to differentiate this project for all learners, consider creating quilt square templates for different types of evidence. For example, students can choose to focus on characterization, symbolism,

key events, or literary devices to prove their thesis statements. Once they decide on the types of quilt squares they would like to create, they can use the templates to sketch out a plan for each square. Foster creativity and show students plenty of models to set the expectations for the assignment and help inspire new ideas.

Once groups complete their quilts, they can present their assembled quilts to the class, explaining how each square contributes to the central theme or thesis claim. Alternatively, groups can hang their quilts around the room for a gallery walk, and students can select a quilt to evaluate. Another option includes a class discussion about the different themes and analysis among groups. Consider asking students reflective questions such as these:

- Which quilt did you find the most interesting and why?
- How did seeing the other quilt projects affect your understanding of the theme and interpretation of the novel?
- What new ideas about the text did you discover by completing this project?

The Literary Quilt Project promotes critical and creative thought about themes in literature, collaboration with peers, and artistic expression. Consequently, it forms an engaging and unforgettable mode of analyzing a novel, one that students will remember because of its uniqueness as compared to traditional assignments.

THE POSITIVE RUBRIC

This section explores the idea of reimagining the traditional essay rubric from what a student does wrong to what a student does well. Although I always strive to highlight at least one positive aspect of a student's writing, so I decided to create a rubric that emphasizes constructive feedback, focusing on strengths rather than solely pointing out areas for improvement. That is when I created the positive essay rubric concept. This rubric focuses on recognizing student strengths and areas of

growth with the goal of building student motivation, efficacy, and skills development. It is a completely different way of approaching writing assessment. Not only does positive reinforcement encourage students to reflect on their work, but it also aligns with research that shows positive feedback builds confidence and can lead to better academic success. There is a reason why a teacher saying “Good job” can go a long way—and research supports this concept. Let’s look at what the research shows:

- According to Susan Brookhart’s (2017) book *How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students*, focusing on strengths and providing specific, constructive feedback leads to improved student performance.
- Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) research suggests that constructive and positive feedback leads to best learning. When feedback focuses on students’ strengths and gives them specific ways to work on areas of growth, they can become more motivated and more likely to take risks in exploring new writing approaches.
- Daniel M. Fienup (2019) shows that positive reinforcement, especially when accompanied by positive teaching methods, can significantly boost grades and lower disruptive behavior of students with combined behavioral and learning disabilities.

This research inspired me to create a positive essay rubric that functions much differently than a conventional essay rubric. Instead of only focusing on problems with student writing, this rubric points out the positives and then gives actionable revision steps to consider with the opportunity to earn points back based on revisions. By focusing on praise instead of criticism, students are more receptive to overall feedback. According to Carol Dweck (2006), when we give specific, “process-oriented feedback,” we nurture a growth mindset (p. 206). This way of thinking leads students to consider difficulties as chances to grow and develop rather than as something that negatively affects self-esteem—Positive reinforcement opens students’ willingness to absorb constructive criticism instead of shutting down.

To set up the positive rubric, award points based on a list of skills. For example, the rubric could have the following list of targeted writing skills for an introduction paragraph to a literary analysis essay:

Targeted Writing Skills	Positive Feedback 1 +20	Positive Feedback 2 +20	Recommended Revision
Attention-Grabber	Your attention-grabber immediately grabs the reader's attention in an effective way and establishes a captivating tone for the essay. It is engaging and makes me want to read more—great work!	You've started your essay with a creative and intriguing hook that sparks the reader's interest. It connects well to the topic of the thesis statement and leaves a strong first impression!	Earn up to 20 points by revising or adding an attention-grabber to hook the reader from the start. Try beginning with a surprising fact, a vivid description, or a quotation from the text.
Author's Full Name	Excellent work introducing the author's full name in your introduction and for spelling it correctly! This demonstrates your attention to detail and establishes your credibility as a writer.	Great job including the author's full name in the introduction. It shows that you understand the importance of giving credit to the writer from the start. Your reader will fully understand whose work the essay analyzes.	Earn up to 20 points by including the author's full name in your introduction to give proper credit for the text you are going to analyze. Double-check the spelling to ensure accuracy as this adds to your credibility as a writer.
Thesis Statement Claim	Your thesis statement is clear, focused, and narrowed to address the specific theme of the text. It provides a strong foundation for your essay and logically connects to the evidence.	Great job crafting a thesis that is both insightful and focused! Your claim is logical and stated as a narrowed theme statement, making it easy for the reader to understand your interpretation of the text.	Earn up to 20 points by revising your thesis to make it more focused and developed as a theme statement instead of just a thematic topic. Make sure the theme is not just a single word idea, and be sure it clearly reflects your interpretation of the text.

Targeted Writing Skills	Positive Feedback 1 +20	Positive Feedback 2 +20	Recommended Revision
Thesis Statement Evidence	Your thesis statement does an excellent job incorporating specific evidence in the form of literary elements and techniques that support your theme. It sets a clear road map for the body paragraphs.	Great work including precise and relevant evidence in your thesis statement! This strengthens your argument and provides a clear structure for how your body paragraphs will develop your ideas.	Earn up to 20 points by revising your thesis statement to include specific literary devices that directly support your theme. This will help prove your interpretation and provide a foundation for the analysis in your body paragraphs.
Transition Between Intro and Thesis	Your transition from the attention-grabber to the thesis statement is smooth and natural. It guides the reader into the thesis statement in a logical way.	Excellent job connecting your attention-grabber to your thesis statement! The flow is engaging, ensuring the reader stays interested in your overall argument.	Earn up to 20 points by revising the transition between your attention-grabber and thesis statement to gradually narrow the focus of your introduction. This will help guide the reader from the broad attention-grabber into the specific thesis statement.

As the sample rubric shows, a positive rubric works much differently than a classic rubric. To grade the introduction paragraph (in this example), I would select one of the two positive comments if the student executes the skill effectively. In this case, the student can earn 20 points for the skill that receives a positive comment. However, if a student needs further work on a specific skill, I require revisions for that skill and then conference with the student on their changes. At that point, I assign the student a final grade and commend them for their dedication in improving their writing. Although this method involves revision and resubmission, it works! It is an entirely different way to grade, but it builds student confidence in writing.

By assigning a final grade to an essay without any requirement to go back and make corrections, students merely keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. I have seen students get frustrated with too many negative comments, shut down emotionally, and throw away their essays as they walk out of the classroom. That does not do any good for student growth or efficacy. By reshaping how we grade to focus on the positive and allowing for revisions that help students master important skills, we can get better writing results. We must think outside the confines of past pedagogy. We must put ourselves in the shoes of our students whose writing abilities have trended downwards as technology usage has trended upwards. The positive essay rubric focuses on the strengths within student work and encourages growth with constructive, supportive feedback.

The Innovative ELA Teacher Pack

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