

Making the Argument for Narrative

October 25, 2017

The Write Space

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Last year I visited a high school in the New London area to observe a new Early College Experience teacher who was trying to get her students to write in a journalistic style about a student-chosen current event.

“I’m trying desperately to get them to break away from some of their learned habits about writing,” she explained.

Prior to enrolling in the ECE course, the students had written literary analysis almost exclusively in their English classes, and though it had been years since this group had been expected to write five paragraph essays, many still defaulted on the format.

I kibitzed on writing groups, sat in on conferences, and read a few drafts over shoulders or sitting beside students during my time in the class, and what I saw was that the students were basically competent writers who were perfectly capable of replacing literary content with current events—but they had no idea what a news article looked like. They had no sense of how journalism differed from literary essay. And so they still wrote introductory paragraphs of five sentences with the inverted triangle approach of a broad topic sentence that narrowed to a clear thesis, and in the interest of sticking to tried and true formulae, they wrote exceedingly long paragraphs in order to stay close to the magic five—although a few intrepid students actually wrote six or even seven paragraphs.

When I got to sit down with the teacher after class to put our heads together, the first thing we both realized was that these students had no idea what a news article really looked like. I don’t think they have *never* read a news article, but they probably don’t read the news very often (fewer than a quarter of Americans do on a daily basis), and they certainly have never been expected to read it with an awareness of style or craft.

They needed, first and foremost, to read some news articles as mentor texts and not just for current events content in order to learn a few things about the world. They needed to observe journalistic style, such as short paragraphs, an opening hook, the use of narrative to bring life to data and information, and how to use quotation and biography to give voice and a face to what might otherwise be a dry subject.

Look at this [article](#) from today’s *New York Times* about Senator Flake. The first three paragraphs are pure narrative. The first one is even biographical and historical—“As a child growing up in Snowflake, Ariz., a town that his Mormon pioneer great-great-grandfather helped found in the 1870s, Senator Jeff Flake learned to sing a popular children’s hymn, ‘Choose the Right.’” The fifth paragraph is a quote from Flake, giving the senator a voice, and only in the

sixth paragraph do we see a turn into more straight-forward informational writing that explains the event that is at the heart of the report.

But had the article begun with that sixth paragraph—“Mr. Flake came out early in the presidential primaries as an opponent of Mr. Trump, and unlike many in his party, he has remained a vocal critic, despite representing a state where the president is still popular”—I doubt many of us would have read much further.

I suppose I have three points I’m trying to make here. One is that we need to vary the texts our students read and write. A second point is that we need to use texts as mentors. This teacher had her students read news articles in order to think critically about current events, but she did not ask them to read as writers, thinking critically about the decisions the reporter made *as a writer*. That switch became crucial for the future success of her approach. Lastly, we need to think about the ways argument writing uses narrative, the ways narrative writing make an argument, and the ways informational writing is present in both.

Too often, we teach narrative, informational, and argument in entirely discrete ways. The state standards and our district curricula often encourage this. Unfortunately, the result is artificial (and ineffective). We get essays like this teacher was seeing (and, frankly, like many I’ve been seeing this semester) in which the students can swap out literary content for personal or contemporary content, but which are still presented in the staid and predictable format of an objective, syllogistic, thesis-driven work of literary analysis.

Which, truth be told, isn’t even good literary analysis!