

Let Students Write Their Masterpiece

Students find that a long writing project of their choosing lets loose their inner writer.

Steve Gardiner

Dan walked up and placed his novel on my desk—all 240 typed pages of it. Half a ream. Nine months of work. In his own quiet way, he was bursting with pride.

Dan had exceeded the length guidelines for the masterpiece assignment I give students. He perfectly captured my ultimate goals—to get students to write regularly on a sustained project of their choosing, take ownership of their writing, and produce their best work. The masterpiece assignment is a way to meet all those goals.



The idea for this assignment came to me when I took over the newspaper class at our high school and rewrote the curriculum so that students who took the class could receive credit in English for the course. Having used sustained silent reading (SSR) in English language arts classes successfully for many years (Gardiner, 2005), I wanted to find the writing equivalent of sustained reading—an extended writing project that would keep students coming back to it, writing continually, and making important decisions about their own progress and development. Students would work much as professional writers do, learning time-management skills in the process. The assignment needed to present a challenge—but a reasonable one; students would have other work to do for the class while they wrote their masterpiece.

The structure I devised requires students to write eight or more typed pages each six-week grading period. They work on their masterpiece both in class and at home. At a bit more than one typed page per week, this amount isn't overwhelming, but it requires students to keep up, unless they want to write eight pages at once at the end of each grading period.

This flexibility fits perfectly in the newspaper class because students often can't work on their newspaper articles until they set interviews up. Many days they have free hours—which they use to work on their masterpiece.

Why the Masterpiece Is Motivating

Students choose the genre for their masterpiece. I've seen the full spectrum, from poetry to personal essays to research papers. Most students write a novel and proceed chapter by chapter, building their characters and plot. Within reason, they can change genres or start a new story or series of poems at any time.

This freedom to choose their genre and then make their own decisions regarding the content is crucial to the assignment's success. Choices give students a sense of autonomy because they gain control over a key part of their education.

We start with a brainstorming session in which I ask students many questions about characters, places, events, and ideas that could become part of their masterpieces. Sometimes the freedom overwhelms students, and they don't know what to write about.

When students have more choice and control of a project than they've ever had before, they become curious.

I've had good luck having one-on-one conversations with such students, pulling out topics that are important to them and helping them see how their interests can be worked into a story or series of poems.

Some students need help organizing ideas for a big project. I talk with them about jot-listing, webbing, free writing, and other methods of gathering and arranging ideas. Occasionally, I have students who start and restart too often. We discuss finding one idea and giving it a chance to develop fully. Often, these students just need to hear that their idea is worthwhile.

Allowing students to determine the content (with the guideline that it be appropriate for school) also means students are likely to pick topics they can work with successfully and that relate to their lives. Topics that have reflected students' passions include motorcycles (which a student used as a basis for a novel about a group of boys who went to motorcycle races every weekend); the dynamics of friendship; and family memories. Vygotsky (2004)

believed a student is most effective as a writer when that student is "encouraged to write on a topic that is intrinsically understandable to him and engages his emotions and, most of all, encourages him to express his interior world in words" (p. 46).

... And Builds Resilience

Because of this freedom, most masterpiece writers start out intrinsically motivated. Because of the way the project is set up, they come back to their masterpiece regularly, with sus-

tained effort, throughout the year. Students seldom face an extended project of this magnitude, and it develops resilience. Writers learn to stay with their project despite the frustrations and procrastinations along the way. Because this writing assignment requires hundreds of decisions, it invariably leads students down false paths and requires them to reexamine their intentions and ideas. This review, and the adjustments students make to return to the right path, fuel what Dweck (2006) calls a growth mind-set, in which students become willing to take risks, learn from mistakes, and persevere toward a goal.

In coaching our school's cross country team, I've realized most team members are self-motivated. They want to improve with each race and from year to year throughout high school. What these athletes want from their coach is guidance—good workouts, encouragement, and sometimes congratulations or consolation.

Students working on their masterpiece seem to feel the same. Just as I

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SY MONTGOMERY on Facing Fear

In my work, I travel to deserts and mountains and jungles. I've worked in a pit with 18,000 snakes. I was hunted by a tiger in India and swam with piranhas and electric eels in the Amazon. I've gotten dengue fever in Borneo, was held at gunpoint in Africa, and wandered off into the cloud forest, fuzzy-minded with altitude sickness, in Papua New Guinea. (My colleague, photographer Nic Bishop, rescued me.) People ask me, "Aren't you afraid doing this work?"

While I'm in the field, no—I am not afraid at all. (I wasn't even particularly afraid at gunpoint, just annoyed.) The scary part is when I get home and start to write.

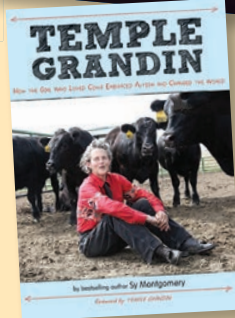
Sometimes the words flow freely. Sometimes not. But always, at some point, there's a fear, and that fear is the same one every writer encounters: fear of failing.

It's worse than fearing for my reputation (if I even have one). My fear is that I will fail my story—the wonderful treasure trove of splendid creatures, gorgeous landscapes, compelling dramas, and wise people.

I wish I could tell you that I have found a way to believe in myself. But sometimes I don't. Often I don't. There are times when I am certain that I am just not good enough.

But I *can* believe in the story that has been entrusted to me to tell. And I can believe in my teachers—teachers who have helped me in the classroom and teachers who surround me as I go into the field. Sometimes they have two legs. Sometimes four. Sometimes eight. Sometimes none.

When I can't believe in myself, I can believe in my



teachers: Mr. Clarkson, my first journalism teacher. Ricardo Pipa, a shaman I met in the Amazon. Clarabelle, the tarantula to whom I dedicated a book. Octavia, the octopus at the New England Aquarium whom I visited every Wednesday for a year, who came to know me and look me in the eye and embrace me with her hundreds of suckers. The dozens of nameless (to us) animals I've met on my travels—from red-sided garters I met in the Narcisse Snake Dens to the tiger who hunted me in India. And even the animals I didn't meet—like the snow leopards I never saw in Mongolia's Altai Mountains, but who surely saw me—and left their scats and footprints behind for me to ponder.

There's a Buddhist saying I love: When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Teachers appear to me constantly, thank God. They are all around me, and they are all around you. Our job is to recognize them and to listen for their truths.

And that's what I would want to pass on to you and your students: Believe in yourself if you can, but if you can't, believe in your

teachers. Because teachers are always out there, ready to show you wonders, ready to help you accomplish miracles. All you have to do is see them—and trust them.

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explain to the runners that each race will be three miles and that running three miles in 17 minutes will earn them a varsity letter, I give my masterpiece writers some guidelines: how many pages to write; what to avoid (such as excessive violence, or racial or gender-based slurs); and how to use time effectively. And I give feedback on what each student has done so far at the end of each six-week grading period. But their written opus is their project, not mine.

Peer readers can boost a student's confidence more in five minutes than I could in a month.

Many of my students crave the kind of freedom this assignment provides. When they come to me for help, it's because they want their writing to be excellent. They want to be proud of their masterpieces, just as an athlete wants to do his or her best. Those who adopt this feeling bring other students with them; the enthusiasm about the masterpiece is infectious.

Student Reluctance

When students hear that they'll need to produce 48 pages, they're shocked, especially when they realize this is in addition to their other work for class. It often sounds like this:

STUDENT: You can't expect us to write 48 pages. How could anyone do that?

ME: I do expect it, but I'll help you. Many students have written 48 pages or more in the past, and many will do it in the future.

STUDENT: How will we know what to write? How will we even get started?

ME: I'll help you with all those questions, but I want you to think about this. I'm guessing no teacher ever gave you the chance to decide for yourself what you want to write and gave you a whole school year to write it.

This last idea intrigues students—because it's usually true. With the masterpiece, students have more choice and control—and more work—than they've ever had before. They become curious.

The solitary nature of writing is perfect for the introverts in my class, who want to be left alone to think, plan, and create. Some extroverts get uncomfortable with so much creative silence; they need interaction. I support this by talking one-on-one

with students as needed and by having a read-around in the middle of each six-week period.

On read-around day, each student brings three or more pages of new material. I put kids in groups of four or five, and each student reads his or her selection to the group. The group makes suggestions, points out inconsistencies, or heaps on praise. I talk to the class about how to provide feedback (be a good listener, ask questions, give constructive feedback) and how to receive it (listen carefully to what your group says, ask for suggestions, notice any rough spots as you read, and so on).

Often, peer readers boost a student's confidence more in five minutes than I could in a month, with comments like, "You've got to read what Alice wrote. It's incredible!" One of the biggest successes of the masterpiece assignment is seeing students recognize the (often hidden) talents and accomplishments of their classmates.

Everything Comes Together

As the school year progresses, the momentum of the masterpiece takes over. Students come in on Monday saying, "I had an idea over the

weekend and wrote four pages." I regularly discuss the contours of the project with them, as a group, to keep it in their minds, and individually when necessary.

In May, everything comes together. Students have accumulated large quantities of writing. The read-arounds have created helpful group responses to individual efforts. As we wind down, some students produce covers or illustrations for their books. I allow this, but I let them know that it's the writing that I'll grade.

As students turn in their books and reports, the work forms a mountain on my desk. Students are amazed at what the class has created. Many students have written 48 pages to the line, but it's common for students to turn in 60 or 70 pages. A few will hit 100, and as mentioned earlier, Dan wrote 240 pages.

Dan's attitude reflects the high standards masterpiece writers develop. When he put his science fiction novel on my desk, Dan didn't talk about the technological wonders or complex characters in his story. He looked at me and said, "Sorry, I didn't quite get it finished." Although he was proud, he clearly wished he'd had time to write more. That's OK, Dan. It's still a masterpiece. ■

References

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