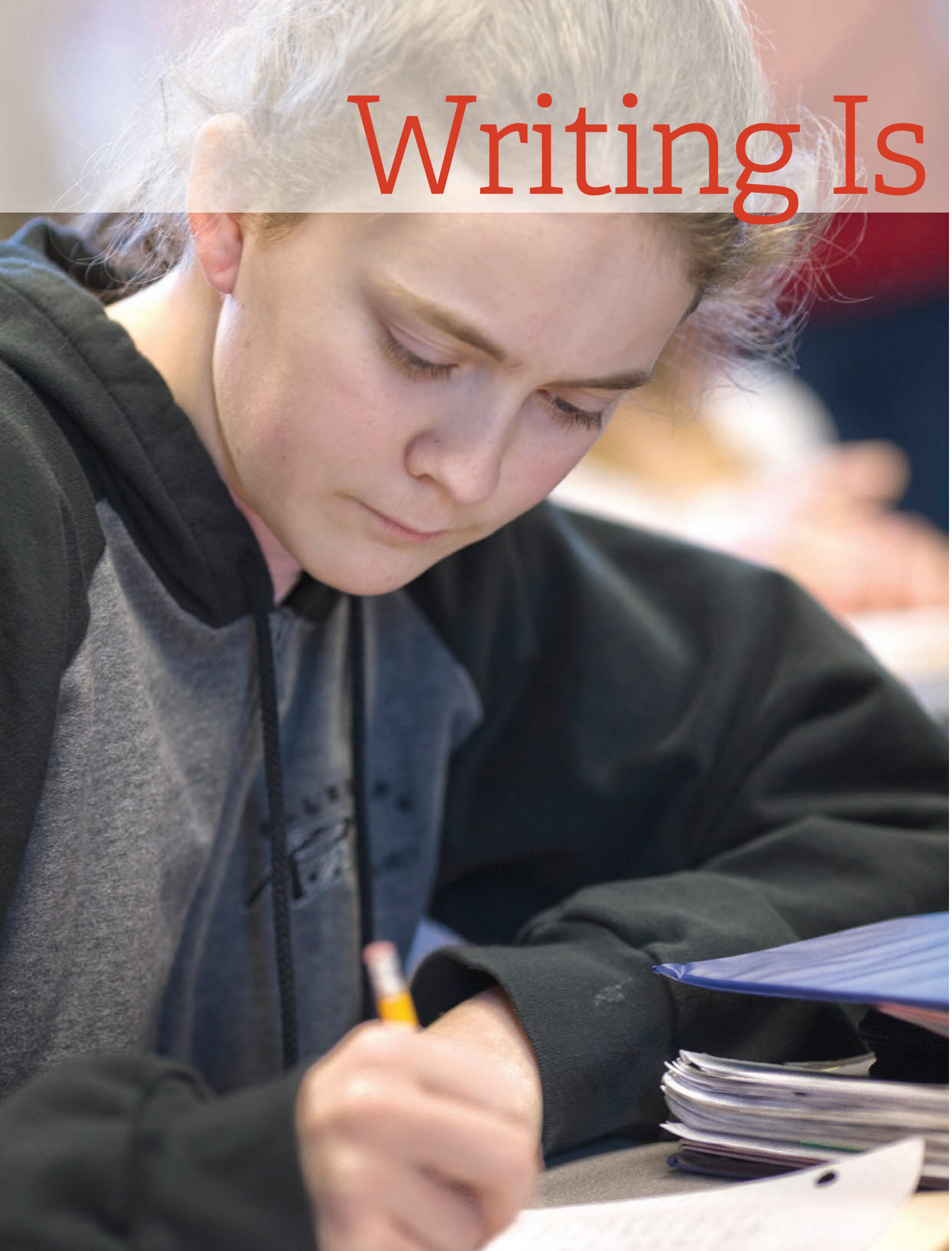


Writing Is



# TAUGHT,

*Don't count on students to just catch the writing bug.  
Give them something to write about, frequent  
opportunities to write, and thoughtful feedback.*

**Carol Jago**

**W**hen I was a young teacher, I believed in a field-of-dreams approach to writing instruction: Build it, and they will come.

Invite students to write at length about whatever they want, and they will magically morph into good writers.

Many years and many red pens later, I know better. If we expect students to learn to write, we need to teach them how. This means embedding in our practice daily opportunities for students to write, combined with deliberate instruction about the moves good writers make as they compose.

## **Give Students Something to Write About**

I suppose it is possible to stare into the wild blue yonder and find inspiration, but most students I know require something more tangible as a stimulus for writing. Rather than dividing the curriculum into separate reading and writing units, we need to design instructional plans in which the collection of texts students read—novels, poetry, nonfiction, artwork, photographs, data displays—inspire a response in writing.

For years, we've been offering students extraordinarily thin prompts for their writing.

Should the school year be longer? Should students be required to wear uniforms? Who is your hero? Pretend you're a raindrop. We shouldn't be surprised when the resulting papers are uninspired and underdeveloped. All students can rely on for evidence is the material they find on the hard drive between their ears. A more effective approach is to provide students with a range of information they can draw from as they compose.

For example, I begin a unit called "Working" by asking students to write for a few minutes about the role work plays in their lives and the lives of those around them. The goal of this informal writing is to create a context for the lesson. After students turn and talk with a partner about what they wrote, I show them Vincent van Gogh's iconic painting *The Potato Eaters*. Students look at the image for two solid minutes, asking themselves, "How does work seem to have affected the people in this picture?" Then they share their observations in small groups, using evidence from the painting to support their claims.

Eavesdropping on one group's conversation, I heard Molly comment on the worker's hands. "Look at how bumpy and gnarled the man's fingers are. It's like he's been digging in the ground with them

# Not CAUGHT



**Tweeting in 140 characters does little to prepare students for the kind of writing they will be expected to produce in college.**

gun could be a tool, though, like the shovels his father and grandfather used. Or maybe he is just talking about how the pen feels in his hand, snug, powerful, waiting to fire words. I like the way snug and gun sound in the line.

It always amazes me the way students can write their way through confusion to comprehension.

These quick-writes become the basis for a class discussion of the way the poem compares Seamus Heaney's work as a poet with the work that his father and grandfather did. After the discussion, I have students listen to Heaney reading the poem on the Poetry Foundation website (see [www .poetryfoundation.org/poem/177017](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177017)).

We follow up this literature lesson with a reading and discussion of Mike Rose's 2009 article "Blue Collar Brilliance: Questioning Assumptions about Intelligence, Work, and Social Class." Rose uses his mother's experience as an accomplished waitress to make the case that physical work often involves high levels of thinking and analysis. He concludes,

If we believe everyday work to be mindless, then that will affect the work we create in the future. When we devalue the full range of everyday cognition, we offer limited educational opportunities and fail to make fresh and meaningful instructional connections among disparate kinds of skill and

forever. The knuckles are gigantic."

Tim immediately chimed in, "Do you think he washed his hands before eating?"

"They are dirty. Maybe that's what van Gogh is saying—these hands grow the food that feeds his family. The whole painting looks potato-colored," Molly replied.

While the room is still abuzz with talk about *The Potato Eaters*, I hand

out copies of Seamus Heaney's poem "Digging."<sup>1</sup> I read the poem aloud and then have students read it to themselves, choose a line that strikes them, and write about it. For example, Jeremy chose the line, "The squat pen rests, snug as a gun." He wrote,

Maybe this line means that he uses his pen like a gun. But that doesn't make sense because the poem isn't about shooting but about digging. I guess a

knowledge. If we think that whole categories of people—identified by class or occupation—are not that bright, then we reinforce social separations and cripple our ability to talk across cultural divides.

I ask students to determine, paragraph by paragraph, how Rose constructs his argument and provides evidence to support his claim.

Only after all this reading, thinking, and talking do students begin crafting their own compositions on work. I give them the following task: *Summarize the key ideas about work found in the readings and analyze and evaluate those claims, explaining why you agree or disagree with them. Use relevant material from those readings, class discussion, or your own work experiences and/or research to support your analysis.* In their responses, students explore such key ideas as the relationship between a person's job and his or her identity, how the work our parents do influences our own job choices, and the challenge of finding meaningful work that also puts food on the table.

This kind of integrated reading and writing unit, which draws on a collection of texts, offers students both a substantive stimulus for their writing and room to explore their own understanding of the world. It is also tremendously engaging—although hard—work from beginning to end.

### Have Students Write Frequently

Most students do not write enough to learn to write well. You've probably heard the argument that with all the texting and Facebook posting students are doing, they are actually writing more than ever. But these headline-like missives are poor preparation for academic discourse. Tweeting in 140 characters does little to prepare students for the kind of writing they will be expected to produce in college.

## JEFF KINNEY on Taking Your Time

Writing is a skill that needs to be developed over time. I think most people (myself included, at least at first) think that they can just sit down and grind out the next great novel. But like any craft, good writing requires expertise. You can't short-cut the process. It took me eight years to develop the Wimpy Kid universe, and I don't think I could have worked it out in a shorter time frame than that.

Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* speaks to this idea. He says that in order to become an expert on anything, you need about 10,000 hours (or 10 years). Then, when the opportunity to use your expertise appears, you'll be ready. That's what happened to me. I took my time in developing a concept, and when the opportunity came, I had a fully fleshed-out world to present.

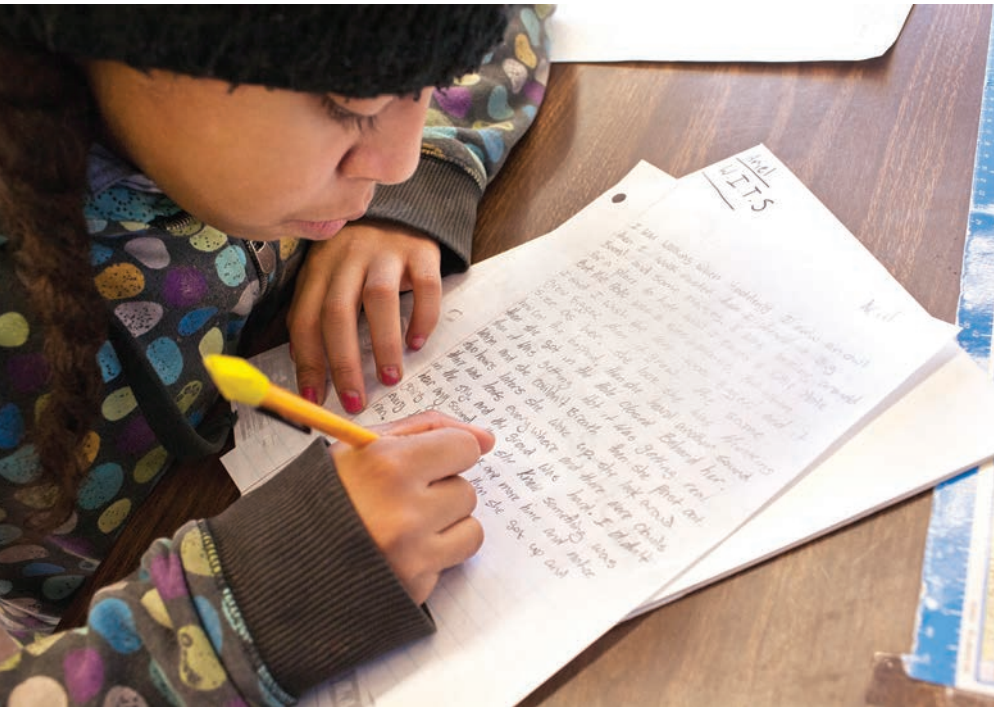
But even after all these years, every aspect of writing remains difficult for me. I admire people for whom ideas seem to come in torrents. My ideas come in tiny little drips—and sometimes not at all. I was recently reading about Carl Barks, the creator/genius behind a huge volume of comic books about Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge that were written in the 1940s–1960s. He said that there were times when the ideas were flowing so fast, he couldn't keep up with them.

I've never had that wonderful problem, and I doubt I ever will. I have to set aside time to generate my ideas, and there's no guarantee that even if I sit for hours, any good ideas will come. I wish I could get around this difficulty because if I could, I'd be a much more prolific writer.

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**Jeff Kinney** ([www.wimpykid.com](http://www.wimpykid.com)) is a cartoonist and the author of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series of books. His most recent book, the eighth in the series, is *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck* (Amulet, 2013).





developments in agriculture and to make a claim of their own that's supported by research.

- In art class, have students compare and contrast the two views of 1940s nightlife pictured in Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* and Archibald John Motley's *Nightlife*. How do color, line, and point of view affect one's reading of the paintings?

Establishing an expectation and assigning writing are only the first steps, of course. For students to improve as writers, they need feedback both on what they've done well and what they need to do to improve.

### Offer Students Feedback That Matters

Teachers do a disservice to their students when they accept first-draft jottings as finished papers. Requiring students to hone their sentences improves not only their writing but also their thinking. Hugh Blair (1801), a preeminent 19th-century rhetorician whose lessons for writing influenced Abraham Lincoln, explained,

We may rest assured that, whenever we express ourselves ill, there is, besides the mismanagement of language, for the most part some mistake in our manner of conceiving the subject. Embarrassed, obscure, and feeble sentences are generally, if not always, the result of embarrassed, obscure, and feeble thought. . . . He that is learning to arrange his sentences with accuracy and order is learning, at the same time, to think with accuracy and order. (p. 280)

I was working recently with a 10th grade student on her "Working" essay, which was, unfortunately, quite feeble. It seemed to me that Emily, ordinarily a strong writer, was trying too hard to guess what I wanted rather than using the assignment to explore her own ideas. Instead of using our precious writing conference time to critique the draft, I asked her whether she had a

Recent research by Applebee and Langer (2013) finds that in any given week, the average secondary student produces only 1.6 pages of writing in English class and 2.1 pages of writing in all their other classes combined. The writing students are asked to do in content-area courses often bears no resemblance to anything one would call composition but instead is largely a "show what you know" task. Applebee and Langer recommend that

rather than using writing to measure *what has been learned*, we need to move it forward, in conversations appropriate to the disciplines, to using writing *in order to learn*. When students are afforded the opportunity to use writing to develop understandings, sort out ideas, and engage in discussions within the community of the classroom, students are likely to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying principles. (p. 217)

The study also reveals that 40 percent of 12th graders report that they are seldom asked to write a paper of three or more pages. Students can't

learn to write with so little practice. Of course, the elephant in the room is that no one wants to read more student papers. I take that back. I like reading essays—the first dozen. It's the next 150 that get me down.

The only way for a school to ensure that students have enough varied opportunities to write is to make writing an expectation in every class across the curriculum. I'm not talking about having students practice their English language arts skills in other content areas, but rather about helping them deepen their disciplinary knowledge by writing. For example,

- In social studies, invite students to analyze a recruiting poster for Pony Express riders (see [www.thelastbestwest.com/pony\\_express\\_rider.htm](http://www.thelastbestwest.com/pony_express_rider.htm)), explaining why the Pony Express was looking for "young men under 18," and "preferably orphans."

- In a science lesson focusing on the pros and cons of genetically modified food, ask students to read articles arguing for and against chemical

job. In an instant she was telling me about working at Hot Dog on a Stick on the pier, reflecting cogently and insightfully about the image she had to project in order to keep her job. The details she described were vivid and telling—perfect supporting evidence for a reflective essay on the nature of work. I took a few notes as she talked

## One has only to think of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to realize the power of artfully chosen words in the service of important ideas.

and handed them to her as fodder for a new essay. Emily was happy to abandon her first draft; I was delighted to be able to steer her toward more meaningful writing.

To help students improve feeble sentences, we are going to have to wean them from feeble thinking. This will require enormous investments of teacher time to provide students with thoughtful individual feedback—feedback that, as Grant Wiggins (2012) explains, is goal-referenced, tangible and transparent, actionable, user-friendly, timely, and ongoing.

Before guffawing at the idea of offering “timely” responses to the five classes worth of student papers piled on your desk, remember that responding to student writing need not entail rewriting students’ papers. In fact, this approach often has little effect on student achievement. Too many writing teachers currently confuse their role with that of a copy editor, correcting every error, turning passive voice to active, and revising long passages of garbled prose. I know that I’ve often been guilty of giving students more red-inked direction than they can possibly

absorb in a single sitting. Instead, it’s more helpful to focus on a single aspect of the student paper that needs improvement.

We need to help students become better readers of their own writing. They need to be self-critical; they need to know what good writing looks like.

### Teach the Features of Good Writing

Teaching students to write well need not, and should not, be formulaic. Instead of relying on cookbook approaches to writing instruction, demonstrate for students how effective writing is

- *Organized.* Writers may arrange and deploy their material in many different ways, but the effect is always coherent.

- *Well-developed.* Effective writing offers evidence to support its claims and explains how this evidence relates to its purpose.

- *Audience-aware.* The tone of a piece of effective writing is appropriate for its intended audience. Writers are aware of how word choice, sentence length, syntax, and register all affect how the piece will be read.

- *Free of mechanical and grammatical errors.* Mistakes in usage, unless intended for effect in dialogue or expression, distract readers. Good writers use all the tools at their disposal—spell check, grammar check, or a good friend—to ensure that the writing they send into the world has been carefully edited.

### Why a Core Skill?

One has only to think of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to realize the power of artfully chosen words in the service of important ideas. Lincoln’s “plain” language was far from artless. He had chosen his words and crafted his thoughts with accuracy and order. His speech represented a lifetime of robust thinking about whether a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal can long endure. Lincoln believed that it could, and in a piece of writing 272 words long he convinced a country.

I believe that for our democracy to long endure, we need to enable all our children to think clearly and to express what they think coherently. We need to make writing a core skill. [↗](#)

<sup>1</sup>Other poetry texts that work well for this unit are Philip Levine’s “What Work Is” and Marge Piercy’s “To Be of Use.”

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**Carol Jago** (jago@gseis.ucla.edu) has taught middle and high school English for 32 years and is associate director of the California Reading and Literature Project at the University of California—Los Angeles. She is author of *With Rigor for All: Meeting Common Core Standards for Reading Literature* (Heinemann, 2011).

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