

FRESH TAKES ON  
TEACHING  
the Literary Elements:  
How to teach what really  
matters about Character,  
Setting, Point of View,  
and Theme

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm  
Boise State University  
[jwilhelm@boisestate.edu](mailto:jwilhelm@boisestate.edu)

based on  
*Fresh Takes on Teaching the Literary Elements*  
Michael Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm  
Scholastic, 2010



## What is Effective Teaching- and Learning?

Rank the following scenarios from the scene in which the best teaching is taking/has taken place (1) to the scene in which the least admirable teaching and learning has taken place (6). After you do your individual ranking, you'll be working in small groups to try to persuade others of your ranking. Therefore, as you do your ranking you should be thinking about the principles that inform your ranking and how you'll explain and defend them to others.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. Frank has been taking golf lessons for six months. His pro is famous for basing his instruction on four key principles. Frank knows these principles by heart. In fact, he's so good at explaining them to others that his playing companions feel that they are getting the benefit of professional advice without having to pay for it. However, Frank isn't always able to put these principles into practice. Sometimes everything clicks for a hole or two but rarely for more than that. Frank scored in the low 90's when he began his lessons, and he typically scores in the low 90's now.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Maria has completed her dissertation and has just accepted a job in the Department of History in a major research university. As she packs up her apartment, she finds herself thinking about the course that started her on her way, an introductory course on 19th century European history. Although she doesn't remember much about the specific content (in fact, she chose an entirely different area for her own specialty on the role of immigrants in the labor movement) and has rejected the type of historiography her professor did, she does remember the passion that Professor Neal displayed in her teaching, and the profound conviction she expressed that "doing history" matters. That was the first time Maria thought that studying history could make a difference, and that being a historian was a worthwhile pursuit.

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Peter recently moved with his two small children to a house in the city on a street far busier than the one they lived on in the suburbs. Peter explained to his kids, ages two and three, that they must never walk in the street because cars were dangerous. One day he was raking leaves while the kids were playing. He turned his back for a minute or two and looked back, horrified to see his kids jumping in the leaves he had raked into the street. He ran to the kids and slapped their hands, the first time he had ever physically disciplined them. The children were shocked and burst into tears. Neither child ever went in the street again.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. As Jude looks back on high school, she realizes that her favorite class was sophomore English. It was different than any other class she had ever taken - maybe it was this uniqueness that made it powerful and special for her. In this class there were no formal assignments. Her teacher, Mr. James, began the

year by soliciting topics from the class that were of interest to them and that were also of social significance. He then brought a wide variety of materials in on these topics - ranging from articles and videos to classic pieces of literature. He also encouraged them to find their own information. Students spent almost all of their time reading and thinking about these issues, usually on their own. Each week, discussions and debates would be held in small groups. At the end of each quarter, groups formed and created "knowledge documents". They were free to choose their topics and their projects. During the year, Jude had participated in creating a museum display, a video documentary, a hypermedia document, and an informational website. Each quarter ended with a "Family and Friends Night" where these projects were shared. Though Jude couldn't remember Mr. James ever actually instructing her in any way, she had never read so much or been so motivated to learn. And though she couldn't really name what she'd learned, she knew it had to do with asking questions, working alone, and working with others.

\_\_\_\_\_5. Tom has a piano competition coming up soon. His teacher has gone through Tom's piece with him several times, note by note, explaining every detail. His teacher has also recorded the piece the way it should be played. Tom listens to it all the time; he even falls asleep with his Walkman on. Tom practices hours every day until he plays the piece exactly the way his teacher did. At the competition Tom plays the piece just as he had hoped and he wins first place. His parents have never been so proud.

\_\_\_\_\_6. Arlene is working this summer with her uncle, who is an electrician. He insists that she know how to do everything, and that she understands why they do things the way they do. It is hard, frustrating, challenging, but fun - and she feels like she is learning a lot. Her uncle often tells her: "I want to help you understand electricity the way electricians AND physicists understand it." To this end, they began playing with batteries, conducting wire, and light bulbs to make different kinds of circuits. Her uncle then asked her to articulate rules of electrical circuits. He then took what she thought and set up experiments that contradicted what she thought. He often said to her: "Observe, explain and observe again!" Pretty soon her uncle would ask her to explain problems that she saw on the job and to talk him through his repairs. Soon after that, he let her do her own work, under his careful eye, then allowed her to work on her own. Arlene felt like she really knew about electricity, and that every day she knew a little bit more that built on what she knew before. Still, this kind of learning took a long time, and there were still things she didn't understand and that her uncle wouldn't let her do.

## TEACHING WHAT MATTERS ABOUT CHARACTER

Activity: Personality Tests

### **Which is Most Comfortable for You?**

coordinating the work of people who are highly competent OR emphasizing what I personally believe is of importance

dreaming up imaginative ideas OR getting things done as and when they arise

adding established facts to what I already know OR uncovering new potential in other people or situations

comforting other people who feel hurt or upset OR forming my own explanations of how things work

---

### **How do other people annoy you most?**

if they change things that are already working well OR if they want all the facts before trying anything new

if they insist on following procedures OR if they won't compromise over their private convictions

if they compromise to keep the peace OR if they argue over small differences of opinion

if they take action quickly without thinking through the implications OR if they come up with ideas that aren't directly related to current realities

---

### **Which do You Enjoy Most?**

thinking about what is in the unknown OR doing practical things that have a tangible result

forming my own rationale of why things happen OR taking care of other people's feelings


holding fast to my own, personal values OR checking everyone has done what they were meant to do


trying out new ways of doing things OR contemplating my own observations


---

t < 10 min   [Which outsider are you?](#)

Which greaser would you be most like? Find out here!

 [Which Bond Are You?](#) Are you Connery, Craig, Moore, or Brosnan? Take the 10 question quiz to find out.

 [Which Woman are you from "Star Wars"?](#) Find out which of the lovely ladies of "Star Wars" you are most like!

 [Which Woman are you from "The Iliad"?](#) Find out which of the women or goddesses you are from "Troy"!

### Activity: Roommate Ranking

Pretend that you are going away to summer camp and the camp has sent you the profiles of five potential roommates. Rank them from the person you'd most like to room with (1) to the person you'd least like to room with. If you're a boy, pretend that all of the profiles were written by boys. If you're a girl, pretend that all the profiles were written by girls.

\_\_\_\_\_ Chris

Favorite subject: math

Future occupation: Engineer

Favorite TV show: *Star Trek*

What I like to do out of school: I spend most of my time outside of school on the Internet.

Statement: I know I don't have a lot of friends, but I'm the kind of kid that when I'm your friend I'm really your friend. I enjoy getting to know new people. My friends tell me that I'm a good listener. Maybe I developed that ability because I don't talk much. But I hope that when I do, I have something worthwhile to say.

\_\_\_\_\_ Alex

Favorite subject: PE or English

Future occupation: Basketball player

Favorite TV show: *Sportscenter*

What I like to do outside of school: Play ball

Statement: I guess most people think of me just as a basketball jock. I really shouldn't complain because I love basketball. It's the most important thing in my life. But I really like other things too, like art and reading. It surprises people sometimes. I'm not exactly sure why that is.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sam

Favorite subject: NONE!

Future occupation: Something that makes lots of \$

Favorite TV show: *American Idol*

What I like to do outside school: Hang with friends.

Statement: I'm kinda bummed that my parents are making me do this summer camp, so I REALLY hope I get a cool roommate. Somebody funny who's willing to bend the rules a bit. I'm not wild, but I really like to have fun, and that's what summer's for anyway. I have to say that one thing that's okay about camp is that like being outside. So my roommate should like that too.

\_\_\_\_\_ Dana

Favorite Subject: Art

Future occupation: Something involving music

Favorite TV show: Anything about the supernatural

What I like to do outside of school: Play my guitar

Statement: Music is my life. If I'm not playing it, I'm listening to it. I especially like head-banger stuff. But I'm open to enjoying almost anything. I'm a bit nervous about this camp thing, to tell the truth. My friends

at school tell me it's weird that I want to go. But anything beats sitting at home. I like new experiences, so I'm sure I'll like it.

ACTIVITY: Who is the best Father? Each of the following scenes features a parent or parents. Read each scene carefully and then rank according from the parent who is the best (#1) to the parent who is the worst (#4). Make sure you can support your decisions. You'll be talking about them in small groups and then we'll be sharing them as a class.

1. Julie is an eighth-grader. Her parents got divorced when she was six-years-old. For seven years she spent about the same amount of time with each of them, but three years ago, her dad moved to California, all the way across the country from her. He had a great job opportunity and he said that the lifestyle there suited him. These days Julie spends every other Christmas vacation and three weeks each summer with him. He calls every week, but it's hard to talk. He has trouble keeping track of current friends and classes. A couple of times when Julie faced a really big decision she called and her dad was really helpful. She knows he'll help her decide what college to go to. Somehow he senses what's best for her. But she wishes he were more interested in the day-to-day details of her life.

**Ranking for Julie's father** \_\_\_\_\_

2. Joseph is a high school junior. He has a lot of friends, but they sometimes wonder about him. He'll never do anything that might get him in trouble with his father. Joseph's father is police officer and he's really strict. He won't even go to a party at which beer might be available a concert to which somebody might bring drugs. He says, "Can't. I think that kind of stuff is stupid. But more than that, you guys just don't know my dad. He'd kill me." Joseph's father has never hit him, but he's really strict. He makes Joseph work on school 90 minutes every day whether has homework or not.

**Ranking for Joseph's father** \_\_\_\_\_

3. Terry is high-school sophomore. Her dad is a biker. He makes a good living repairing motorcycles and he's very generous with Terry. Plus, he's promised to put her through whatever college she chooses. Terry loves the time they spend together at home. Her dad is a whiz a math and he's great at helping her with her homework. He also teaches her how to fix his bikes. Terry could probably get a job as a mechanic, but she doesn't want to. She feels it's kind of a weird scene. In fact, she wishes that her dad weren't so into it. He has the earrings and tattoos like many of the other riders. It embarrasses Terry a bit, especially when he shows up to school in his leathers. She tried talking to him about it once, but he just laughed and said, "Don't tell me that you're ashamed of your old man."

**Ranking for Terry's father** \_\_\_\_\_

4. Rorie is a seventh grader. But lots of people don't realize she's so young because she's such a great golfer. She's already won the woman's championship at her golf club. Rorie loves to compete. She just wishes that she had more time to spend with her friends. But her dad is always pushing her to practice, practice, practice. He's always wanted the best for her. In fact, he worked two jobs and took a second mortgage out on their house so they could afford the club's \$150,000 initiation fee. He said that it was a worthwhile investment, both because it'd help her golf game and because her dad says "At clubs like ours you only meet the best kind of people. You know what I mean. It's not for everyone." When Rorie plays, her dad always caddies for her. He's really a big help. She doesn't much mind when she hears other players call her "Daddy's little girl."

**Ranking for Rorie's father** \_\_\_\_\_

One of the most important things a reader has to do when reading a story is to figure out what kind of people the characters are. Sometimes authors come right out and tell us, but most of the time they give us clues and expect that we'll use those clues to come up with our own ideas. Please read each of the little stories to figure out what you learn about the underlined character. Write down what you learned about the character and the details that taught you what you learned.

1. It was a cold and rainy day. Joan heard a noise coming from behind the dented, empty garbage can. She walked over to the sound, unsuccessfully attempting to avoid the muddy puddles that were in her way. She saw a small dog. It was caked with mud. Quickly she scooped it up, hugging it tightly against her new winter coat. She took the dog home and took care of it. Once it was healthy, she put up signs to try to find its owner.

2. Ed had been sitting next to Kris all semester. She was the most popular girl in the school. And the nicest, though Ed. Ed himself was quiet and serious and a good student. He was friendly, but he didn't have many friends. The prom was coming up. It took all of Ed's courage to approach Kris: "Kris, you know that the prom is coming up. I was wondering whether you'd like to go with me."

Kris quickly turned away to look at her friends: "Well, gee, Ed. I'm, ah, busy that night."  
"That's okay," said Ed. "Maybe some other time." "Wow," he thought. "She didn't say no. I'll be she'll go out with me next time I ask her."

3. His blue suit had become shiny with age. It used to fit, but now it hung loosely over his bony shoulders. His forehead was lined with deep creases. His hands shook slightly. His knuckles were swollen and knobby and looked like the roots of old trees.

4. The cafeteria was crowded. Ten to twelve people sat around tables designed to seat eight. The noise of conversation created a steady hum. When V. J. entered the cafeteria, though, all the conversation stopped. He walked over to a table filled with first-year students. They all got up and left, one of them spilling his milk on his shirt in his hurry to leave. V. J. sat down at the empty table, looked around, and smiled.

5. Everyone was there. Of course, it was the first dance of junior high. Sam watched and listened from the corner. He held his hands behind him, occasionally bouncing them to the rhythm of the band. When laughing couples passed him, he dropped his eyes and held his breath.

6. Mr. Smith had been teaching school for fifteen years. On the day of a scheduled spelling test the class took five minutes to settle down. He said: "Shut up! Now I'm sick to death of you talking. If you don't shut up, I'm tellin' you. . . I . . . I . . . I . . . Shut up!"

Character's name:

First impression of the character (Remember, you should explain as much as you can about the kind of person the character is):

This impression is based on

The groups to which the character belongs (be specific):

The character's actions (be specific):

The character's language (be specific):

The character's thoughts (be specific):

The character's body language (be specific):

The character's looks (be specific):

How others relate/compare to the character (be specific):

Check point #1: Explain how your impression of the character has changed or been confirmed. The change or confirmation is based on

The groups to which the character belongs (be specific):

The character's actions (be specific):

The character's language (be specific):

The character's thoughts (be specific):

The character's body language (be specific):

The character's looks (be specific):

How other relate/compare to the character (be specific):

Drama: Press Conferences, Hotseating, etc.

## TEACHING WHAT MATTERS ABOUT SETTING

Setting Chart

ELEMENTS/ LEVELS	Physical	Temporal	Social	Psychological
Micro:				
Meso:				
Macro:				

### ACTIVITY: Paintings and Photographs

#### Activity: Movie Reviews/Summaries

**ARRANGED** centers on the friendship between an Orthodox Jewish woman and a Muslim woman who meet as first-year teachers at a public school in Brooklyn. Over the course of the year they learn they share much in common - not least of which is that they are both going through the process of arranged marriages

**THE DEER HUNTER** –in this epic from director Michael Cimino, a group of working-class friends from near Pittsburgh decides to enlist in the Army during the Vietnam War and finds it to be hellish chaos -- not the noble venture they imagined. Before they left, Steven (John Savage) married his pregnant girlfriend -- and Michael (Robert De Niro) and Nick (Christopher Walken) were in love with the same woman (Meryl Streep). But all three are different men upon their return with blood curdling results.

**SHERLOCK HOLMES** Robert Downey Jr. stars as the legendary London sleuth Sherlock Holmes, focusin on his relationship with Jude Law as dear Dr. Watson, in this Guy Ritchie reinvention of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's oft-adapted detective series. Based on a comic book by producer Lionel Wigram, the story follows Holmes and Watson as they face off against the villainous Blackwood (Mark Strong). Rachel McAdams cc stars as quick-witted beauty Irene Adler.

## ACTIVITY

### New Friends

Every four years around the time of the Olympics the Department of Education would put on a Middle School Olympics where kids from around the world would come together to showcase their talents. The event lasted three weeks.

Every participating school could send 5 students. But each student had to have a different talent or interest. Joe felt fortunate to be selected to represent the athletes from his school. The other students who were going were Marcy, who played the cello; Zack, who was really into manga; Sharon, who starred in all the school plays, and Ed, who was a complete braniac.

Once the kids were selected, they had to get together for lots and lots of orientation. Joe never would have hung out with any of the other kids who were going. Not that he had anything against them. At his school, though, athletes stuck with athletes pretty much. Well, really basketball players stuck with basketball players. That was the big sport. He knew some of the other kids resented basketball and he could see why. Some of his teachers even seemed to favor him because he was the star. His mom, though, always kept his head from getting too big. She seemed to get along with everyone. Sometimes she took him to the African American neighborhood where some of the guys on his AAU team played pick-up games. She was the only White person there, but she seemed comfortable. More comfortable even than he was. Joe wasn't used to being in the minority. His school was all White. That doesn't mean everybody was the same, though. Some of the kids, like Marcy and Ed came from families who had lots of money. Some, like Joe, were from families who had a hard time making it, especially now with the unemployment rate so high. Joe didn't want to go to the pick-up games at first, but his mom convinced him that it was good to get out of his comfort zone and try something new.

The orientation activities were kind of boring, but Joe had to admit it was kind of cool to talk with people that he didn't usually hang out with. That's why Joe was a bit surprised at how much he enjoyed the conversations with the other students from his school that were going to the Olympics. Sure it was a little hard to get the conversation started the first few times they got together. Some of the basketball players had bullied Ed during the year and he especially seemed edgy when Joe went up to him, but by the time they took the school van on the three-hour trip to Washington, D.C., they talked easily together. Ed really cracked Joe up. He knew more than the teachers who were chaperoning and he wasn't afraid to let them know it. And Marcy, even though she played classical music, loved to listen to Lupe Fiasco, Joe's favorite rapper. Joe even started to appreciate manga a bit, and he promised himself that he'd go to the plays next year.

Once Joe arrived at the Olympics, he had to say good-bye to his new school friends. Each kid went off to a different dorm at the college where they were staying. Joe and all the athletes were in a dorm set off from everyone else behind a small woods. Some of the other kids were in apartment style rooms that held 8 people. But Joe's dorm only had doubles.

The athletes were an amazing collection of people. His roommate Aban was a soccer player from Iraq. Joe thought that maybe they put an Iraqi kid and an American kid in the same room on purpose, just to show that sports was a way to bring people together. It was pretty interesting to room with Aban. Aban was Muslim. He prayed five times every day. And he had lots of amazing stories to tell about the war. Sometimes American soldiers were the heroes. But sometime they were the villains. Aban didn't seem to hold that against Joe, though Aban tended to hang out with the other Muslim kids. But after a few days, they were comfortable with each other and they started to share their hopes and dreams in quiet whispers after lights out in the dorm. It didn't seem so odd to be talking with someone so different. Everyone at the camp was doing it.

But Joe did have a chance to hang out with basketball players too. He and this Nigerian kid Chined had great one-on-one games. The both played small forward. Both were already 6'2" and were still growing. Both liked to drive to the basket but could use more practice on their outside shot. After their games, they'd talk. Joe found out that Chinedu's family was really rich because his dad was in the oil business. His life was so different from Joe's on that end. Joe never even went to the movies because his mom couldn't afford it. Sometimes at dinner he and Sharon would talk about how unfair it seemed that some of the kids they were meeting had so much when the two of them had single moms who had to struggle so much.

And then there was the dorm counselor, Enrique, a 45-year-old teacher from Venezuela. Joe had never met anyone like him. And he didn't know much about Venezuela except something that his social studies teacher had said about the fact that Venezuela had a president who hated the United States. He didn't know a thing about sports, at least not about basketball. But he sure was willing to learn. Joe had never met an adult who listened so hard to kids. Enrique mostly listened, but when he talked it was really worth paying attention to. He seemed so wise about so much: friends, girls, school, you name it. Most nights everyone would gather around Enrique, talking about anything and everything, from what happened on the courts or fields to what was happening at home.

Joe was really sorry when the three weeks were over. The whole experience was a life-changing one. The last days there everyone exchanged emails and promised to add each other as Myspace friends.

Think about Joe and all the people he has met. Rank them from the person Joe is most likely to stay friend with (1) to the person Joe is least likely to stay friends with (7). Be prepared to defend your answers.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Marcy, the cellist
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sharon, the actress
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ed, the braniac
- \_\_\_\_\_ Zack, the manga artist
- \_\_\_\_\_ Aban, the roommate
- \_\_\_\_\_ Chinedu, the basketball player
- \_\_\_\_\_ Enrique, the dorm counselor

Which of the following had the greatest influence of your rankings. Please give a 1 to the factor that was most influential down to a 5 for the one that was least influential.

- \_\_\_\_\_ The way things were at Joe's school and how they tend to be at middle schools in general
- \_\_\_\_\_ The economic situation and issues of social class and status
- \_\_\_\_\_ The kind of person Joe's mom was at home
- \_\_\_\_\_ The kind of place the camp was
- \_\_\_\_\_ How other countries thought of the United States

Which of the following changes to the situation would most affect your rankings. Please give a 1 to the change that would have the biggest influence to

- \_\_\_\_\_ If Joe's dorm were an apartment-style dorm near all of the other dorm
- \_\_\_\_\_ If Joe's dorm counselor had been really strict and didn't seem to like kids all that much
- \_\_\_\_\_ If the Middle School Olympics lasted one week instead of three
- \_\_\_\_\_ If the story took place before kids had access to personal computers

ACTIVITY: Using Picture Books

ACTIVITY: Drama/Role Play; Tableaux; Two-sided tableaux

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

<b>ELEMENTS ►</b>	<b>Physical</b>	<b>Temporal</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Psychological</b>
<b>LEVELS ▼</b>				
<b>Micro:</b> local area of a hunt	Jungle; rocky and difficult terrain	Some aspects of the hunt are socially very much like ancient times.	Relationship between local headmen and Corbett; between headmen and locals	Deep rules about male-female, superior and inferior relationships; intense fear
<b>Meso:</b> Northern India—culture of railroad employment	Mountainous ; high expectations and high work load	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clash of more modern culture with more traditional</li> <li>• Clash of English culture with Native Indian culture</li> <li>• Clash of Indians' regard of tigers as mystical with English regard of tigers as animals</li> </ul>	Caste system of Hindu culture—difficulty of communicating across castes; marginalization of women, who are often put to death when husbands die	Desire for independence on part of native Indians, in conflict with their need to rely on English and to work within the English system
<b>Macro:</b> English-Indian relationships/colonial power to occupied power	Passive resistance of some Indians to English colonials	1920s: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No GPS,</li> <li>• No electronic communication</li> <li>• No good maps</li> </ul>	Difficulty relating across culture, from ruling class to ruled	Distrust/desire of native Indians for help in getting the tiger



## TEACHING WHAT MATTERS ABOUT PERSPECTIVE/POINT OF VIEW

Activity: Drama

Here's a dramatic frame for a two-person drama that should establish understanding of these

four scales: equal to/separate from author; uninvolved/fully involved/omniscient/humanly limited; completely reliable/unreliable

### **Role 1:**

Imagine that you're Pat, a 14-year-old first-year student in a suburban high school. Your favorite band is coming to the city to play in a club. The club is 21 and over, but everyone tells you that the club's security lets in anyone who has a ticket, and those tickets can be bought online. The club has a great reputation for bringing in the best new music and the only trouble in recent years was the time that the crowd pushed down some barricades trying to get in, and one person fell and broke a leg. You and three friends would love to go. In fact, at lunch you told everyone at the table that the four of you were going to go. People were a bit surprised because you've never been to a club. The club is six blocks from the nearest train station. Those blocks get lots of foot-traffic during the day but not so much at night, though police cars are usually on the prowl. The concert starts at 9 and is scheduled to be over by 12, which would leave you 30 minutes to get to the station to take the last train home

### **Role 2:**

You're Chris, a single parent. You noticed in the paper that your son's/daughter's favorite band is coming to one of the most established clubs in the area. You went to concerts there when you were in high school. Back then they had Sunday concerts for the under-21 set, and you went to several of them, but you also snuck in twice to see bands that were special favorites. It was so convenient, just four blocks from the apartment where you lived. But things are different now. The city's crime rate is way up and you remember hearing about some trouble at the club recently. You're afraid that your son/daughter is going to ask you to go. You don't want to fight, but you wouldn't be able to drive as you have to stay home with your other kid and you worry that your son/daughter isn't familiar enough with the city to get there safely. Plus, the last marking period, your son/daughter didn't get as good grades as usual. You've mentioned that the poorer grades will result in fewer privileges.

### **The Scene:**

Pat (the child) has been at home taking care of his/her younger sibling as he/she always does, waiting eagerly for Chris (the parent) to come home. Pat knows that Chris likes some time after work to unwind but is worried that the tickets for the show will be sold out quickly. Chris enters the room with a sigh and starts leafing through the mail. Pat decides that there's no time like the present to ask Chris for permission to go to the concert and to buy tickets for Pat and his/her friends. They've promised to reimburse Pat. The first line is Pat's.

## **Perspective Lost: A Key to Resolving Conflicts**

Conflict is when two parties disagree about something of importance to each. When you are in a conflict, you grow increasingly aware of what you see as the central, important, issue. You become highly sensitized to how you are affected by the issues and by the other person's behaviors.

But as our introspection waxes, our awareness of the other person wanes. Most of us know a lot less about how the other person is affected and how he or she views the issue. In fact, you may have heard friends at one time explaining that the other person in their conflict simply wants to make them miserable, or to get back at them for some past misunderstanding. This is rarely true. Like you, most other people engage in conflict because they really do have genuinely different interests, expectations, information, or values.

The key to resolving a conflict usually lies in understanding the issues and affects from the perspectives of both parties. How would you answer the following questions?

- What are most the most important issues to her/him?
- How does the other person feel about the dispute?
- How would s/he define the problem(s) that need to be resolved?
- How would s/he describe my behavior in this dispute?
- How has my behavior in the dispute affected her/him ?

When you can answer these questions, you will have discovered a potentially important key for unlocking the dispute. Those concerns are probably the reason that the other person is in conflict with you. If you can propose alternative solutions that address his or her concerns, you are far along the path of resolving the issues. Even more than resolving the immediate dispute, you have begun to construct a foundation for a more positive working relationship.

Activity: Simulated Texts. Please read each of the following little stories carefully and then discuss the questions following each story with your group.

1. My Dad is the best dad ever. I mean, how many fathers quit their jobs just so they can be their kid's little league coach? My Dad says he knows that selling the house and moving to an apartment will be hard on Mom and my two sisters, but he's willing to make the sacrifice because he thinks I'm going to be great some day. Even though I'm the smallest kid in our league, I'm one of the best. At least that's what dad says. And he doesn't trust anyone else to coach me. He even got into a fight when I made the traveling team and the league asked someone else to coach that team. They said something about pressure and that he should remember that we're only 11. But my dad says that that's when the great ones start. That's another reason we moved. He doesn't want me hanging around with losers who just play the game and don't take it seriously. Me and my dad take it seriously, though. We work at least three hours a day on my hitting, even when I'm sick. Even in the off season. I used to play soccer and I like that too, but my dad says he wants me to be dedicated. He never played soccer because after all it's not even an American game. I miss it sometimes, mostly because I could see my friend when we played. Nobody else practices all the time like me. But I'll have a leg up on them next season, that's for sure. At least that's what Dad says.

What is the narrator's attitude toward his Dad? Rate it on the following two scales:

---

Clear attitude

Hidden attitude

---

Approval

Disapproval

Is the narrator's dad the best dad ever? Place the narrator on the reliability scale:

---

Completely reliable

Totally unreliable

2. Man, that Joe is such a loser. Just because he's the star of the football team, he goes around like he's the big shot and friends with everyone. He'll talk to anyone, even first-year students and the band geeks. But I know he's just doing it so people will like him. And when he won that award but wouldn't accept it unless the whole team was also recognized, I mean c'mon, who does that? The people I hang with usually hate jocks, but they say this guy is different. Sell-outs.

What is the narrator's attitude toward Joe? Rate it on the following two scales:

---

Clear attitude

Hidden attitude

---

Approval

Disapproval

Is Joe a loser? Place the narrator on the reliability scale:

---

Completely reliable

Totally unreliable

If you think the narrator is reliable, explain what makes him/her reliable. If you think the narrator is unreliable, what makes him/her unreliable?

What in the monologue are you sure is true?

If you don't accept the narrator's interpretation of the situation, what's yours?

3. Mr. Smith is so unreasonable. Music's a big thing at this school. He had to know that the spring choral concert was scheduled Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of the first week of March. It's always that week, has been for years. So what does he go and do? He schedules a major exam on Friday with study sessions after school on Wednesday and Thursday. We have dress rehearsal Wednesday after school, and all the kids in the chorus will be getting ready for our performance on Thursday. And it's not like I'm the only one. Seven other kids in the class are in chorus. I thought I could go to him and ask him to put off the test. I thought maybe he'd listen to me. I have one of the best grades in the class. Not that that makes me special, but he has to know that I care about his class. I really work hard at it. I've been to every study session so far. That's the only way I can even pass because his exams are so hard. I've never liked math, but I understand why it's

important and I don't resent putting in all the extra work. When I asked him to delay the test, he just went off on me. He said something like, "So now Mr. Bigshot director thinks he can send one of his students to tell me music is more important than math.

Ridiculous." I tried to tell him that the reason I was hoping he could delay the test is because I thought math was important and I wanted to spend the time on it that it deserved. He laughed in my face. I couldn't believe it.

What is the narrator's attitude toward Mr. Smith? Rate it on the following two scales:

---

Clear attitude

Hidden attitude

---

Approval

Disapproval

Is Mr. Smith unreasonable? Place the narrator on the reliability scale:

---

Completely reliable

Totally unreliable

If you think the narrator is reliable, explain what makes him/ her reliable? If you think the narrator is unreliable, what makes him/her unreliable?

What in the monologue are you sure is true?

If you don't accept the narrator's interpretation of the situation, what's yours?

If you think the narrator is reliable, explain what makes him reliable? If you think the narrator is unreliable what makes him/her unreliable?

What in the monologue are you sure is true?

If you don't accept the narrator's interpretation of the situation, what's yours?



\_\_\_\_\_ Humpty's life hadn't been a bad one.

(a) Jake had always been among the youngest kids in his grade. (b) That had never been much of a problem. (c) He remembered back to first grade when he was the shortest **kid in** class. (d) But he was also one of the fastest, so he still got picked when they played playground games of soccer. (e) But being fast didn't matter now. (f) Now all that mattered was who was sixteen. (g) For at sixteen, you see, you could get a driver's license. (i) And getting a license was clearly the most important thing in the world.

Place each sentence on these two continua:

---

Equal to author

Separated from author

---

Omniscient

Humanly limited

## TEACHING WHAT MATTERS ABOUT THEME/MAIN IDEA

### Main Idea Heuristic

#### 1. IDENTIFY THE TOPIC (OR GENERAL SUBJECT) OF THE PIECE.

To find clues to topic:

- a) Look at the title
- b) Look at the first and last paragraph: the topic is often named and always implied
- c) Ask yourself: what is discussed through the whole selection? What general subject spreads across the whole text?
- d) Look at captions, pictures, words in bold, headings, and so forth for clues to topic.  
What do all of these have in common? What do they all have something to do with?
- e) Remind yourself: The topic must connect to all the major details and events from the selection. Caution: not every detail has something to do with the topic. The topic is the common element or connection amongst the major details.
- f) What do all the major details have in common?

CHECK YOURSELF: It's not a true topic if . . .

- a) it's too general or too big (The topic statement suggests or could include many ideas not stated in the text).
- b) It's off the mark, totally missing the point
- c) It only captures one detail, rather than all of the key details
- d) It captures only some of the details, for example, maybe you didn't think about the ending, or the climax, or a shift or major change of some kind.

QUESTIONS to ask yourself:

- a) Does the topic I've identified give an accurate picture of what the whole selection is about?
- b) Was I as specific as possible in accommodating all of the key details?
- c) After naming the topic, can I now fairly specifically picture in my mind what happened or was communicated in the text? Or might I picture something radically different that also fits my topic statement? If so, how can I revise my topic statement to correct this problem?

2. IDENTIFY THE KEY DETAILS/EVENTS AND THE PATTERN AND TRAJECTORY THESE CREATE BY WORKING TOGETHER.

Authors often plant important ideas in rules of notice, e.g.

- a) Details that reflect or refer to the title
- b) Details at the beginning of the text/ or front and center of the picture
- c) Details at the end
- d) Surprises, revelations, whenever your expectations are not met
- e) Repetition
- f) Lots of attention given to a detail, for instance, long explanation or description
- g) Subheads, bold, italics
- h) Single sentence paragraphs
- i) Changes in character, tone, mood, setting, plot twists
- j) A question near the beginning or the end

CHECK YOURSELF: It's not a key detail if . . .

- a) It's interesting, but it doesn't develop the topic/lead to the central focus

- b) It reminds use of something is even personally important, but if you were to remove from the piece, the work would not lose any significant meaning or impact

QUESTIONS to Ask Yourself:

- a) Are all the details related to the topic?
- b) How do the key details relate to each other?
- c) What pattern do the details make when they are added together?
- d) What point does this pattern add up to and imply?
- e) What can we extrapolate or interpolate from the pattern?

3. IDENTIFY THE MAIN IDEA (the theme of point the author makes about the topic)

- a) the statement of main idea you name must make a point about the topic and cover the whole selection
- b) Ask yourself: Is the main idea directly stated? If not, it must be inferred from the pattern and relationship of the key details
- c) Which details help me decide on the main idea? Why are these details important?
- d) The central focus considers how the details relate to one another or lead to one another (what caused or correlated or led to what?)

Activity: Picture Mapping

## REPUBLIC OF COCKROACHES –by David Quammen *Natural Acts*

In the fifth chapter of Mathew's gospel, Christ is quoted as saying that the meek shall inherit the earth, but lately, other opinions suggest that it will more likely go to the COCKROACHES. A decidedly ugly prospect: That our dear planet – after the final close of all human beings – ravaged and overrun by great multitudes of cockroaches, plagues of them, scuttering herds shoulder to shoulder like the old herds of bison. Legions of cockroaches will sweep over the prairies like driver ants. This, unfortunately, is not the fantasy of a pessimist. It is the touch of hard, cold science.

The cockroach is a popular test subject for laboratory research. It adapts well to captivity, lives a long life, reproduces quickly, and will survive in full vigor on Purina Dog Chow. The largest American species is about two inches long. Here is an animal of frugal habits, tenacious of life, eager to live in laboratories and requires very modest space. Tenacious of life, indeed! Not only in kitchen cupboards, in dark corners of the basement, the average cockroach is a hard beast to kill.

Survival. The cockroach is roughly 250 million years old, which makes it the oldest of living insects, possibly even the oldest known air-breathing animal. Think of it this way: Long before the first primitive mammal appeared on earth, before the first bird, before the first pine tree, before the first reptile, the cockroaches were running wild. They can live almost anywhere and eat almost anything.

Unlike most insects, they have mouthparts that enable them to take hard foods, soft, and liquids. They tend to eat anything; however, cucumbers disagree with them.

They are flattened enough to squeeze into the narrowest hiding place. They are quick on their feet, and can fly if they need to. But the real reason for their long continued success and their excellent prospects for the future is this: They have never specialized.

If there was ever to be a nuclear war, probably the cockroaches would prevail. The lethal dose for animals in a pasture is 180 rads (gamma radiation). For horses it is 350 rads. Water is a shield for radiation, so the lethal dose for fish is from 1100 rads to 5600. The dose for humans is not known (no one has been tested to date), but around 600 is the guess.

Cockroaches who were exposed to 830 rads lived to be a ripe old age. A large test group was blasted with about 10,000 rads and HALF the group was alive two weeks later. They don't know exactly how long the second half lasted, but long enough for egg capsules to be delivered, hatch and the life cycle to continue on.

With luck maybe this won't happen. What do you suppose the common cockroach thinks of a can of RAID?