Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone

Helping Students Navigate Unfamiliar Genres

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Portsmouth, NH
WE ARE VERY AWARE, given the multiple ways courses and curricula are structured in individual schools, that not all teachers are able to create a whole curriculum that is genre based, the kind of structure we describe in Chapter 3. Does this mean that you shouldn’t try the Unfamiliar Genre Project? That it will be beyond the grasp of your students? Of course not! While we believe a whole-scale semester of genre study is the way to go, we also see the Unfamiliar Genre Project as a viable—and extremely useful—option, even if it represents your (and your students’) first attempt at consciously considering genre.

In fact, the very first time Sarah attempted the UGP with high school students, she hadn’t yet developed the kind of full semester of genre instruction that she came to in subsequent years (although we think you’d be hard-pressed to find an English teacher who doesn’t talk at least some about genre). During that trial year, she introduced the UGP just after her students finished a semester of

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1 An abbreviated version of this chapter was previously published as “Researching Writing: The Unfamiliar Genre Research Project” in *English Journal* (95.4: 36–42). Copyright 2006 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.
reading-writing workshop in which they independently pursued their interests—their familiar genres, if you will. And so, as she introduced the UGP to her students, she included minilessons in many of the concepts we’ve explored in the last three chapters, especially in terms of immersion, inquiry, instruction, and integration. Even without the full base of genre studies she later added to her practice, she found the UGP an important addition to her classroom—so much so that she has taught it every year since 2004, in a variety of ways and in a variety of classes.

In this chapter, we introduce the UGP in the high school setting, drawing from Sarah’s multiple experiences teaching it in multiple classes over the last few years, offering suggestions for what you might need if you’re taking on the project for the very first time. We share the most current handouts she gives to her students, the assessments she uses, and many of the minilessons she teaches. Then, in Chapter 5, we offer one project as an example of the kind of work her students have produced, a model you can use to discuss the project with your own students.2

**A Case for the Unfamiliar Genre Project**

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, the UGP serves several purposes for high school students: to learn basic research strategies, to engage in a genre study while practicing strategies real writers use to approach new material, to identify the multiple processes writers use to learn about that which is unfamiliar, and to demonstrate that research is a useful tool in creating something students might otherwise think is too difficult.

Perhaps the most important quality of the Unfamiliar Genre Project, though, is that it asks students to use their research by experimenting with and actually writing in the genre they have studied. Applying their newfound knowledge is a critical step beyond research projects that ask students only to present the information they have gathered. Actually using the research, Bloom’s taxonomy tells us, cements the ideas and strategies students encounter in this project into their memories (Bloom, Mesia, and Krathwohl 1964). It also provides students with the confidence of having figured out the constraints and demands of particular genres, especially when they next encounter challenging and perhaps high-stakes genres, such as SAT essays or college applications.

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2Throughout the student samples included in these chapters, you’ll notice occasions of nonstandard English usage and punctuation, as well as certain typographical errors common to student writing. We’ve retained these in order to illustrate authentic student voices.
An added attraction of the Unfamiliar Genre Project is that its topic is reading and writing. The research topics English teachers offer students too often have nothing to do with reading or writing; this project shines a spotlight on English as a research subject.

**Starting Out: First Lessons**

“Take out two different-colored highlighters and clear your desk of everything else, please,” Sarah announces to a room of talkative ninth graders. “We’re going to explore some of your fears about writing today.”

Two students shoot worried looks across the room while another pair simultaneously grin, knowing their teacher is up to something. As copies of the introduction to the Unfamiliar Genre Project circulate through the room, Sarah asks students to fold the handouts in half, demonstrating with her copy. The bottom half of the front page consists of a three-column list of writing genres, a version of the list they’ll see again later in the year when she introduces the Multigenre Research Project. (See the student handout in Figure 4.1.)

“So far this year, most of you have chosen to write in genres that are either pretty comfortable for you or in genres that we worked on together as a class. Today we’re going to start something a little different. For this new project, I want you to purposely choose another kind of genre to write in—a genre that for some reason you find unfamiliar. Here’s how we’ll start: Using your highlighters, make a key in the margin. Use your darker color for genres you like or tend to write in and the lighter color for genres that are challenging or kind of scare you.” As she speaks, Sarah is making her own key on an overhead transparency of the handout.

“Please use your ‘like’ (darker) color to highlight all the genres you like or tend to write in. Go ahead and work through the list now.” Students again shoot looks at each other, seeing what their friends are marking. Soon, however, they are busy at work, marking those genres they have been writing in for most of their lives. “When you finish, pick up your other highlighter and mark the genres you tend to shy away from as well as those you’ve simply never tried. Not all of the items on your page will be highlighted, and that’s OK.”

Students keep looking at the list, occasionally asking for clarification. “What’s microfiction?”

Sarah opens the question up to the class. “Does anybody know? What does it sound like? Maybe that’s one that is worth investigating.”

“Now, read through the items you just highlighted—the ones that intimidate or are unfamiliar to you—and circle two or three that are intriguing enough that you’re willing to learn more about them. I want you to select genres you aren’t familiar with, but I also want you to have fun with this project, so
THE UNFAMILIAR GENRE PROJECT

In your experience as a reader and writer, you’ve likely encountered more genres than you even realize, but it’s also likely that you are drawn to some while you shy away from others. Because we each have distinctive experiences with the many genres we encounter, it’s also true that we have our own comfort levels with each genre. (Perhaps you prefer to write fictional stories, or perhaps making up whole stories from scratch seems impossible to you.) In this project, I will ask you to identify the genres that are personally challenging—genres you are not particularly familiar with, that may intimidate you, or that you tend to avoid. From these, I would like you to honestly select one genre that you do not ordinarily choose to write in but would like to learn more about. This project asks you to investigate, read in, and write in a genre that is personally challenging. It has several purposes: to learn to study genres (which you can apply to future genres you will encounter, like college and SAT essays) and to learn your research process while using your research to create something you might otherwise think is too difficult.

Picking a Challenging Genre

We’ll begin this project with honest soul-searching as you pick a genre that is unfamiliar or feels daunting to you. To ensure that you pick a genre that is truly challenging, the quality of the final piece will account for only a small part of your grade on the project; your engagement in the research process and the reflective journal will constitute most of your grade. See the Unfamiliar Genre Project rubric attached. A proposal in which you identify your challenging genre along with an explanation of why you chose it and what you’d like to learn is due at the start of class on Friday of this week.

Here are some genres you might consider exploring. Don’t limit yourself to these!

- advertisement
- art commentary
- brochure/pamphlet
- children’s book
- closing or opening argument
- comic/graphic story
- constitution (organizational)
- critique of art/photography
- economic analyst report
- essay
  - personal
  - prose
  - literary criticism
  - eulogy
  - how-to book
  - instruction booklet
  - journal article (professional journal)
- letter
  - business
  - complaint
  - condolence
  - cover
  - to the editor
  - of recommendation
  - to representative

(continues)

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FIGURE 4.1. Project Overview: Unfamiliar Genre Project
**THE UNFAMILIAR GENRE PROJECT (Continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>market report</td>
<td>review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memoir</td>
<td>two-voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>microfiction/vignette</td>
<td>book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspaper/magazine</td>
<td>others!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• news article</td>
<td>• others!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• editorial</td>
<td>• psychological evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• feature article</td>
<td>• public service announcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• in-depth report</td>
<td>• resume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• interview</td>
<td>• satire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• personality profile</td>
<td>• scrapbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• obituary</td>
<td>• script</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• opinion column</td>
<td>• feature article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• photo-essay</td>
<td>• novel or novella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• political/editorial cartoon</td>
<td>• parody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• science report</td>
<td>• photo-essay (w/captions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• sports</td>
<td>• poetry (many kinds—pick one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• article</td>
<td>• obituary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• column</td>
<td>• ballad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• season wrap-up</td>
<td>• cinquain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• epic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• free verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• haiku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• sestina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• slam/spoken word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• sonnet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• song (lyrics with music)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• technical report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• user's manual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Research Journal*

Although research includes many steps, the order of these steps may vary, like in writing. You may want to jump right into a draft. You may prefer to begin by reading (and collecting) samples of your genre. Perhaps you will begin by journaling; you might first deal with your fears by putting them to paper. To some extent, this project is intended to allow you to discover your own research process, which you'll write about in your reflective letter. Whatever your process, metacognition (thinking about your thinking) is an important part of this research project. Throughout this study, keep a journal (handwritten or typed—your preference) of your experiences. *Use this journal to keep track of...*

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your daily activities as well as your feelings about each stage of the work. You’ll write about your metacognition in
your reflective letter. Please write in this journal each time you work on the project.

Reading in Your Unfamiliar Genre

One part of your research in this genre study is to simply read within the genre. You must collect the best five to ten
samples of published work in your chosen genre that you can find. (This means that you will be reading more than
five to ten samples!) Once you’ve chosen your models, carefully reread them as you think about (and take notes on)
the writer’s craft, structure, and unique strategies in each piece. You’ll create an annotated bibliography listing each
of these models along with an annotation for each. Finally, consider what the collection as a whole teaches you
about the genre: What are its characteristics? Where are its boundaries? In what ways does this genre borrow from
other genres? In what ways do other genres borrow from this? You’ll synthesize these big-picture observations in the
reading portion of your reflective letter.

How-to Book

In class, we’ll analyze some aspects of writing: audience, purpose, content, organization, presentation, voice, word
choice, sentence fluency, proofreading, and other writing minilessons. We’ll keep our notes from this analysis in a
how-to book that we’ll discuss together, but you will individually track your chosen genre. This how-to book, which
will count toward your homework grade during the unit, will serve as a planning tool for writing in your genre and a
resource as you write your annotated bibliography.

Annotated Bibliography

An annotated bibliography is a formatted list of your model samples (bibliography) with a paragraph of thoughtful
observations about the way each model sample was written or crafted (annotation). You will write an annotation for
each of the model samples you collected for your genre. Notice in the rubric for this project that your annotated
bibliography is worth 20 percent of the project grade. It is important that you pay as much attention to writing your
annotated bibliography as to writing your centerpiece (also worth 20 percent of the project grade).

Writing in Your Unfamiliar Genre

The centerpiece of this project, of course, will be a finished piece in your chosen (challenging) genre. You must take
this piece through several drafts including parent, peer, and teacher conferences (required). Before you actually get

(continues)
THE UNFAMILIAR GENRE PROJECT (Continued)

... to your final piece, it’s likely that you’ll experiment with the genre—you may have several starts before you write the piece you will finish for your final project. *Keep all of the writing (drafts, false starts, conference notes) you accumulate throughout this project.* As you are writing, be aware of what you are doing: How did you write in this genre? What were your influences? What writer’s tools did you use? You’ll synthesize these observations in the writing portion of your reflective letter.

**Reflective Letter**

The last piece you’ll write for this project is your reflective letter. Consider your experience over the weeks of this project. Reread your journals. Reread your drafts and experimental writing. Reread your notes on your reading. With all this in mind, think about what you’ve learned about reading in this project. What have you learned about writing? What have you learned about studying genres and researching in general? Your reflective letter should discuss your experiences with reading, writing, your research process, and metacognition. In each of these sections, make big-picture conclusions from your experience.

**Letter from an Interested Adult**

As you know, I think it’s really important to share your hard work with your parents and guardians. When you are completely finished with your Unfamiliar Genre Project, share it with a parent, guardian, or another interested adult and ask him or her to write a letter to you in response to your work.

**Research Binder**

The final project will take the form of a research binder. It should be typed, organized, and easy to navigate. Your binder should include the following (make one tab for each category):

- centerpiece and reflective letter (including all four sections: reading reflection, writing reflection, research process, and metacognition)
- research (metacognition) journal (with dated entries)
- experimental writing, all drafts, and all conference notes
- copies (with reading notes) of the best five to ten samples of published work in your chosen genre
- parent/guardian letter

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you should select your genre with these criteria: unfamiliar but interesting.” Discussion slowly breaks out as students contemplate, privately and aloud, whether they will choose a genre that is truly unfamiliar or pick something “safe.” To capture this dilemma, Sarah asks students to write about the options they are considering and work through the pros and cons of each. She uses this opportunity to introduce the research journal, a key component of the UGP, for which they have just written the first entry. This first journal entry has a second purpose: it serves as their entrance ticket to the library the next day, where they will conduct a presearch to ensure that they can find plenty of examples that they want to read in their chosen genres.

Thus, the project begins: a project that asks students to identify a genre they find challenging; to gather, read, and analyze model examples of that genre; to identify key characteristics of that genre; to write in the genre; and to keep a research journal in which they think through the project and attempt various drafts. And because the idea is for students to honestly select a genre that is foreign or intimidating, we repeatedly assure them throughout the process (and in the rubric) that this is primarily a research project, and although original writing in their chosen genre will be the centerpiece of the presentation, the writing’s quality will be worth only a fraction of the final grade.

By the end of the multiple weeks devoted to the project, students will present their projects in a research binder containing sections for the following:

1. their best draft of original writing in the studied genre
2. a reflective letter on how the final piece demonstrates their research as well as what they learned in the roles of reader, writer, and researcher
3. a how-to book that captures the essence of their genre as well as their application of the minilessons throughout the project
4. all experimental writing, drafts, and conference notes
5. an annotated bibliography of five to ten samples that they read in their chosen genre with an analysis of the craft (conventions, style, structure, traits, strategies, and so forth) within the piece as well as its quality
6. their research (metacognition) journal
7. a letter from an important adult with whom they chose to share their project

In the pages that follow, we explain step-by-step how the students get from this first-day minilesson to that culminating binder. Beginning with some ideas for how to make the UGP fit into your own context and schedule, we go on to
share the thinking behind, the minilessons for, and some student samples of the major components, in the general order Sarah introduces them to students: the research journal, the project proposal, the collection of sample genres, the how-to book, the annotated bibliography, the centerpiece writing in the genre, the reflective letter, and a letter from an important adult. At the close of this chapter, we also explain our rationale for and approach to assessing these projects.

Creating a Schedule That Fits Your Context

Over the next four to nine weeks (depending on the nature of the class, the purpose for the project, the time available), the high school students will spend at least half of their class time and much of their homework time working on the UGP. Class periods are devoted to library visits, lessons, and workshops. The teacher-led lessons involve introducing expectations, presenting selections of sample projects that the class analyzes for strengths and weaknesses, demonstrating how to keep a research journal, practicing how to identify genre conventions by reading examples, role-playing conferencing strategies, writing annotations, and formatting a bibliography using MLA style. In addition, at least one day a week is devoted exclusively to workshopping this project.

We've included two sample schedules here (see Figure 4.2), just to give you some idea of what planning for the UGP might look like: one for a no-frills four-week version and one for a more extensive nine-week version. The four-week schedule is the most compressed we can imagine. This version allows you and the students to work through all the component parts, but we want to stress that it truly is the no-frills version. It not only leaves no extra time for other parts of your English curriculum, but also leaves out what we think is essential to the research process: time to think, browse, play, explore, even procrastinate (in that thinking-about-the-project-but-not-yet-sure-what-I’m-doing sort of way). This compressed schedule also doesn’t allow for the flexibility we all need to deal with the realities of unplanned weather days, assemblies, counselor visits, and reteaching, as well as individual students’ planned and unexpected absences.

More typically, and especially if the class has not been organized as a series of genre studies, Sarah spreads this unit out over an entire nine-week marking period, pairing it with a novel study or some other unit that runs alongside the UGP, which gives students time to reflect on the UGP and take a break into some other aspects of the curriculum. For example, in a junior-level English course, Sarah teaches the UGP in the third quarter. For a few weeks, Sarah devotes the beginning of each week to preparing for high-stakes tests in a mini genre study, as described in Chapter 3, while teaching the UGP during the last three days of each week. When the test prep is finished, she replaces it with another mini genre unit. Alternatively, once in a Short Readings course, Sarah’s entire class studied
#### THE UNFAMILIAR GENRE PROJECT: FULLY COMPRESSED (THE FOUR-WEEK VERSION)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Introduction 1  
*Introduction to UGP: Highlighter activity*  
**Minilesson 1:** Metacognition and your research journal  
**Minilesson 2:** Set up research binder, tabs | Introduction 2  
**Minilesson:** Browsing  
**At the Library:** Presearch online and in the stacks  
**To Do Today:**  
- Find samples online.  
- Find samples in stacks.  
- Print/check out copies.  
- Write proposal. | Introduction 3  
**To Do Today:**  
- research strategy scavenger hunt | Introduction 4  
**Idea Workshop**  
**Proposal DUE** at the end of the period.  
**To Do Today:**  
- Search for and read samples.  
- Finish writing proposal. | Annotated Bibliography 1  
**Minilesson 1:** What makes it a *model sample*?  
**Minilesson 2:** Mini genre study: MLA bibliography entries  
**DUE** by end of the period: one model sample bibliography entry in MLA style. |

| Analyzing Craft 1  
**Lesson:** News article inquiry (game) | Analyzing Craft 2  
**Lesson:** How-to booklet | Analyzing Craft 3  
**Lesson:** How-to booklet | Analyzing Craft 4  
**Lesson:** How-to booklet | Workshop 1  
**Minilesson:** What is experimental writing?  
**My Workshop Plan (computers available):** |

| Annotated Bibliography 2  
**Lesson:** Mini genre study: Immersion and inquiry into annotations | Annotated Bibliography 3  
**Minilesson:** Writing annotations  
**To Do Today:**  
- Write your annotations. | Review Sample Projects 1  
**Lesson:** Analyze strengths and weaknesses of sample projects | Review Sample Projects 2  
**Checkpoint:** Experimental draft  
**Minilesson and To Do:** Analyze strengths and weaknesses of your (and classmates') projects | Workshop 2  
**Minilesson:** Conferring  
**My Workshop Plan (computers available):** |

| Workshop 3  
**Minilesson:** Organize your binder, tabs  
**My Workshop Plan (computers available):** | Workshop 4  
**Minilesson:** Writing your reflective letter  
**My Workshop Plan (computers available):** | Workshop 5  
**Minilesson:** Proofread your project!  
**My Workshop Plan (computers available):** | Workshop 6  
**Minilesson:** Asking an important adult for a reflective letter  
**My Workshop Plan (computers available):** | **Unfamiliar Genre Project DUE**  
Museum walk. Read and write a reflective letter to *three* classmates. |

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**FIGURE 4.2. The Unfamiliar Genre Project: Two Versions**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Introduction 1  
Introduction to UGP: Highlighter activity  
Minilesson 1: Metacognition and your research journal  
Minilesson 2: Set up research binder, tabs | Introduction 2  
Minilesson: Browsing At the Library: Presearch online and in the stacks  
To Do Today:  
• Find samples online.  
• Find samples in stacks.  
• Print/check out copies.  
• Write proposal. | Introduction 3  
To Do Today:  
• research strategy scavenger hunt | Introduction 4  
Idea Workshop Proposal DUE at the end of the period.  
To Do Today:  
• Search for and read samples.  
• Finish writing proposal. | Introduction 5  
Minilesson 1: What makes it a model sample?  
Minilesson 2: Mini genre study: MLA bibliography entries  
Proposal DUE by end of the period: one model sample bibliography entry in MLA style. |
| Analyzing Craft 1  
Lesson: News article inquiry (game) | Analyzing Craft 2  
Lesson: Make how-to booklet, content v. craft (pp. 1–4)  
My Workshop Plan (computers available): | Workshop 1  
Checkpoint: Bibliography of five to ten model samples in MLA  
Minilesson: What is experimental writing?  
My Workshop Plan (computers available): | Workshop 2  
Checkpoint: Experimental draft  
Minilesson: Conferring  
My Workshop Plan (computers available): | |
| Analyzing Craft 3  
Lesson: How-to booklet: audience and purpose (pp. 5–8)  
(remainder of time devoted to another topic) | Analyzing Craft 4  
Lesson: How-to booklet organization and presentation (pp. 9–12)  
My Workshop Plan (computers available): | Workshop 3  
Checkpoint: Notes from at least two conferences  
Minilesson: Taking and ignoring revision advice  
My Workshop Plan (computers available): | | |
| Analyzing Craft 5  
Lesson: How-to booklet: voice and word choice (pp. 13–16)  
(remainder of time devoted to another topic) | Analyzing Craft 6  
Lesson: How-to booklet: presentation and style (pp. 17–20)  
(remainder of time devoted to another topic) | | | |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop 4</th>
<th>Workshop 5</th>
<th>Workshop 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson</strong>: How-to booklet; leads (pp. 21–22) (Remainder of time devoted to another topic)</td>
<td><strong>Checkpoint</strong>: Lead and alternative lead</td>
<td><strong>Checkpoint</strong> (at end of period): Annotated bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minilesson</strong>: Finding and fixing run-on sentences</td>
<td><strong>My Workshop Plan</strong> (computers available):</td>
<td><strong>My Workshop Plan</strong> (computers available):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To Do Today</strong>:</td>
<td><strong>To Do Today</strong>:</td>
<td><strong>To Do Today</strong>:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Write your annotations.</td>
<td>• Write your annotations.</td>
<td>• Write your annotations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop 7</th>
<th>Workshop 8</th>
<th>Workshop 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson</strong>: Mini genre study: immersion and inquiry into annotations</td>
<td><strong>Minilesson</strong>: Confer first-draft annotations</td>
<td><strong>Minilesson</strong>: Polishing your final draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Workshop Plan</strong> (computers available):</td>
<td><strong>My Workshop Plan</strong> (computers available):</td>
<td><strong>My Workshop Plan</strong> (computers available):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Checkpoint</strong> (at end of immersion and inquiry into annotations period): Annotated bibliography</td>
<td><strong>Review Sample Projects 1</strong> (computers available):</td>
<td><strong>Review Sample Projects 2</strong> (computers available):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To Do Today</strong>:</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>To Do Today</strong>:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Write your annotations.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Write your annotations.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
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<th>Workshop 10</th>
<th>Unfamiliar Genre Project</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DUE</strong></td>
<td><strong>Polishing your final draft</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Writing your reflective letter</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Museum walk. Read and write a reflective letter to three classmates.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.2. (Continued)**
memoir as their unfamiliar genre and expanded the unit to study memoir collectively and independently throughout the week (see more about this version of the UGP in Chapter 6). The point here, of course, is that no one knows the particular demands of your course, your students, your school, and your curriculum like you do. The two model calendars in Figure 4.2 are only frameworks to help you start imagining a plan for your version of the Unfamiliar Genre Project. You might want to try one of these or something in between.

The Components of the UGP

Making the Invisible Visible: The Research Journal

As we mentioned previously, students start one of the most important parts of the UGP—the research journal—on the very first day of the project, as they jot notes about the genres they are considering pursuing over the next few weeks. Students keep up with the research journal throughout the project, noting their developing ideas and reflecting on their learning. As explained in the introductory handout to the UGP,

Although research includes many steps, the order of these steps may vary, like in writing. You may want to jump right into a draft. You may prefer to begin by reading (and collecting) samples of your genre. Perhaps you will begin by journaling: you might first deal with your fears by putting them to paper. To some extent, this project is intended to allow you to discover your own research process, which you’ll write about in your reflective letter. Whatever your process, metacognition (thinking about your thinking) is an important part of this research project. Throughout this study, keep a journal (handwritten or typed—your preference) of your experiences. Use this journal to keep track of your daily activities as well as your feelings about each stage of the work. You’ll write about your metacognition in your reflective letter. Please write in this journal each time you work on the project.

Sarah tells her class, “Think of the research journal as a place where you can record what you did today, but more importantly, pay attention to what you noticed, what you learned.” Sometimes, in the early stages of the project, she offers students prompts to get their daily journals started. Here’s one guided research journal prompt that has been particularly useful:

- 5 minutes: What is the best piece you’ve ever written? (Or think of one you’re proud of.)
- 5 minutes: How did you write it? What was your process?
• 5 minutes: What techniques did you use to craft that piece?

• 5 minutes: How could you apply these successes to the piece you are writing for the UGP?

Why do we push this reflective component so strongly? All students should learn to be conscious of and evaluate the internal dialogue we all engage in as we think, read, write, and learn. The teacher's job is to introduce useful skills and strategies; the students' job is to try out these skills and strategies and find a process that works for them as individuals—in other words, to find which research tools work best for them. This notion of metacognition becomes very concrete in the UGP as students begin to understand that they have the power to learn about that which is unfamiliar and that they can employ this power with or without a graded assignment. A core intention of this project, then, is to nudge students toward lifelong learning.

As students move through the project, they write entries in their research journals that are designed to document their reading, false starts, and approaches while evaluating how each method worked, how it felt, and what they noticed as they were reading and writing. We want students to reflect on frustrations as well as successes so that they might begin to determine what their own processes look like. We also want students to internalize the common wisdom that the process, far more than the result, is key to learning.

Min explains the value she found in the research journal:

One of my main fears was how I was to tackle such a big piece. From writing my trouble out, I dissected it piece by piece. . . . I tried my best to write every day, but I usually wrote a long one every two, three, four days. . . . [I wrote about] the ups and downs of what seemed to flow, what didn't flow and suggestions to self. Over mid-winter break, I went to NYC/Baltimore; I made connections to my project and quickly penned them down as well. I treated it almost like a writing diary!

The research journal, as you'll see, is a key component to the project: it serves as one section in the final binder and as the basis for students' reflective letters and how-to books (two other components, described later in the chapter). (See Figure 4.3 for an example of a student's research journal.)

Committed to a Genre: The Project Proposal

After that first day of students thinking about unfamiliar genres and coming up with a possible genre for exploration, Sarah introduces the concept of immersion.
# Sample Research Journal of Anna Maria List, Who Studied Children’s Books

## February 5, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s Book</th>
<th>Microfiction</th>
<th>Political/Editorial Cartoon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Very easy access to published samples</td>
<td>• Short</td>
<td>• Get to draw pictures!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Get to draw pictures!</td>
<td>• Can read a lot of samples in a short time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Doesn’t take a long time to read many samples</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Even though they’re for kids, they’re still fun to read</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cons</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No picture books in the media center</td>
<td>• Short—must capture all of the story elements in few words</td>
<td>• I’m not that interested in politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could be boring after a while</td>
<td>• Not very common—may have trouble finding many samples</td>
<td>• Not very “in the know” on current events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Every single word matters (not much room for mistakes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sometimes I don’t get the deeper meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## February 8, 2008

The first step I took in researching for my Unfamiliar Genre Project was to narrow down my focus. I was undecided about whether to study chapter books for older children or picture books for younger children and their parents. So I went to the public library and started picking books at random. I read the standard ABC books, chapter books, storybooks with pictures, etc., but I also read a book written in a very innovative style that I hadn’t seen before. It was *The Music of Dolphins* by Karen Hesse, which was a longer book without pictures, much like a chapter book,

---

*Figure 4.3. Sample Research Journal*
but it was written entirely in poems. The whole book was a collection of short poems that all complemented each other, but each one could have stood on its own as a single poem. I thought this type of children’s book was very interesting and new, but I could not find any other books in this style.

From my selection of books, I decided that I would rather do picture books for younger children than chapter books for older children, firstly, because I enjoyed the illustrations so much, and secondly, for the ability of a picture book to communicate an idea or feeling with such a short and simple plot. The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein, for instance, really evoked a strong feeling in me, despite its very simple plot and simple sentence structure. Or maybe it was because of its simplicity.

After I finally decided that I wanted to study picture books, I browsed through the picture book section in the library and checked out as many as I could carry to read at home. Thus, the first phase of my research process came to an end.

February 11, 2008

Things That I Noticed by Reading A LOT:

After coming back from the library, I spent a few days just reading the books that I borrowed. From the samples that I checked out, I noticed many things that I failed to note when I read picture books as a child:

- I like storybooks for older children who know the basics of reading, but still like to be read to. This would rule out ABC books, color books (like Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?), number books, etc. Nothing really happens plot-wise in these books, so I don’t find them very exciting or entertaining.
- Many books that I read had rhyming patterns. They were almost like really long poems. I’m not sure if I like this, but I suppose that the rhythm while reading out loud could be nice to listen to.
- Some books had “deeper meanings,” or messages that could be interpreted differently by an older audience, probably parents. I found this very clever, because the book could be read on different levels, and if a child grew up with a book like this, he/she could discover something new every time he/she read it.
- Some books were original ideas from the authors, and other books were retellings of folktales or stories that the author heard from somewhere else. I found that the retellings tended to have more morals, with unpleasant consequences for the characters that were not morally sound.
- Some books had very elaborate illustrations, whereas other books had very simple and minimalist illustrations. I’m not sure which ones I like more yet.

(continues)
After reading for several days, I went back to the public library to expand my small collection of picture books. I found some books by Shutta Crum, a local author. I read her first novel, *Spitting Image*, some years ago and I really liked it, so I checked out all the Shutta Crum picture books in the library and read them at home.

After I read the Shutta Crum books, I noticed that the one that I liked the most was not an original idea from Shutta Crum; it was a retelling of a folktale. It is called *Who Took My Hairy Toe?* and Crum heard it on a recording of Walter McCanless, who heard the tale from his wife, who heard it from a Southern African American in 1882. This means that the folktale probably originated in the Southern storytelling tradition, according to Crum.

The most noticeable difference between *Who Took My Hairy Toe?* and the rest of Crum’s books was the general feeling that the book evoked. In the end of *Hairy Toe*, the main character is snatched away, screaming, by a red-eyed hairy monster on account of his tendency for theft, and the readers are warned not to steal. In Crum’s other books, such as *The Bravest of the Brave*, and *All on a Sleepy Night*, the ending is a happy one, with the main character tucked safely into bed with loving family members surrounding him. Both of these books were original ideas that Crum thought of herself, and the difference is obvious. I prefer the darker tale of the old man in *Who Took My Hairy Toe?* to Crum’s more pleasant stories, for the excitement, and I think if I read *Who Took My Hairy Toe?* a decade and some ago, it definitely would have made me scared (in a good way) and exuberated.

After reading several more picture books, I noticed another thing that was common in a lot of children’s books. Many children’s books are written in rhyming fashion, almost like the entire book is a long poem with a stanza on each page. I wasn’t sure if I liked this, but the more I think about it, the more clever it seems to write in this style.

First of all, picture books are meant to be read out loud by parents or guardians or older siblings, etc. to young children who are just learning how to read. The rhyming scheme would create a rhythm that would entice the child to listen, much like a song would. Also, the child might be encouraged to follow along and look at the words, and thus the child would be able to associate a certain spelling pattern with a certain sound. Dr. Seuss
employs this method effectively in many of his books, such as *The Butter Battle Book*, *Sleep Book*, *The Lorax*, and *The Cat in the Hat*.

This is also true of onomatopoeias. *All on a Sleepy Night* by Shutta Crum, for example, uses onomatopoeias for sounds that are heard in the night, as well as rhyming format for a narrative. While read out loud, the book sounds very rhythmic, and it is very easy to follow along.

Although I was not sure if I liked rhyming children's books at the beginning of my research process, I have now decided that the style is very clever, and a great way to help children learn to read, which is the main purpose in writing a children's book.

**February 23, 2008**

I read a few more children's books in the past few days, and I have noticed a pattern in the books that I enjoy significantly more than the others. Many of these are also award winners or honorable mentions for the Caldecott Medal or the Newbery Medal. These books had simple plots and simple narratives that could easily be understood by a child, yet these books also spoke to older age groups, such as parents, older siblings, guardians, or 17-year-olds doing genre studies. This, I believe, is the key to writing a book that is interesting to both the child and the parent who is reading the book to the child.

One of my favorite books from when I was very young is Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. I loved this book when I was much younger, and I reread it yesterday from when I checked it out from the library. Much to my surprise, I almost loved the book even more than when I was younger. I was afraid that I would read the book now and realize what a terrible story it is, like when I watch my favorite movies, such as *Free Willy*, from when I was a kid. But when I reread *The Giving Tree*, I saw nuances in the story that I hadn’t recognized before. The story of the tree giving up everything that she had just to please the boy spoke beyond the context of the tree and the boy; it showed the strength of unconditional love. This is the kind of message that people of all ages can relate to, and I think this is why *The Giving Tree* is such a good example of a well-crafted children's book.

**March 4, 2008**

I have decided that as my final project, I will write a retelling of *Androcles and the Lion*. I first read this story in Latin class one or two years ago, and it has really stuck with me. The great thing about this tale is that it ends without anyone dying or getting eternally cursed. These are trends that [I] see a lot in most retellings.
Androcles and the Lion has a happy ending, so the moral is not “if you do this, then this horrible thing will happen to you,” it’s “if you do this, then this wonderful thing will happen to you.” This is a really significant difference, and little kids would also relate to this moral because it turns a monster into a friend.

March 5, 2008
I was at the library, so I went online and printed out these three versions of Androcles and the Lion. The second one is closest to the one that I translated from Latin, and it is also the one that I think I will base my version off of.

March 9, 2008
I started writing my first draft of Androcles and the Lion. I decided that I could change the name “Androcles” to “Andy” to make the story more applicable to modern names. I don’t know if this really makes a difference, but “Androcles” just seems too formal and stuffy for me.

One really difficult thing I have encountered is how to put my own personal twist on the story. I need to add something different and new to make the story interesting, even though it is so incredibly old. Writing a children’s book is beginning to be a lot harder than I expected.

March 12, 2008
I read my draft to our table in class, and they all seemed to like it. I didn’t get as much constructive criticism as I hoped for. Everyone agreed with me that the story needs more dialogue to liven it up, but other than that, nobody suggested any drastic changes. Not that I am raggin’ on my group or anything. I guess sometimes a first draft can be dang close to a final draft.

March 20, 2008
My conference with Ms. Andrew was totally different than with my group. She suggested that the nickname “Andy” have an explanation for the deviation from “Androcles,” and she also suggested that I put in a new character to give him his nickname. I think this is a really great idea, because it will not only enrich the story, but it will make it totally new and fresh when compared with all the other retellings of Androcles and the Lion.

I conferenced with my dad today too, and he said that if I included a new character, it should be Andy’s mother. I think this is exactly what I will do. Things are looking up; the story is improving!
We usually find that our students are unused to the kind of immersion we want them to try in the early stages of this project—taking their time, browsing, and enjoying themselves as they explore a new genre. Thus, Sarah begins the UGP with a day in the library, where students can search in the stacks and online for samples of their chosen genre that they want to read—a first step toward committing themselves to a particular genre and gathering the five to ten samples in that genre that are required for the project. Sarah, though, wants students to clearly understand that immersion involves more than going to the library and grabbing the first samples they see. So she begins with a minilesson about

**March 24, 2008**
I finished editing my second draft, and I think I am really close to my FINAL draft. The words flow pretty well throughout the story, the plot makes sense, I put my own personal little twist in the tale. One thing that I have not given much thought to is the illustrations. I think the illustrations got left on the back burner for awhile, when I was focusing so much on the story and the text.

From my reading and researching, I’ve found that I really like Ian Falconer’s style of illustrating. He works mostly with black and white, but occasionally he puts in a splash of bright vivid color. This really appeals to me, and I also like that his drawings are fairly simple, yet they are still beautiful to look at. I think I will use this style in my story.

**March 27, 2008**
When we were first assigned the Unfamiliar Genre Project, I thought that I would choose to immerse myself in novels, short stories, satires, or some other genre that I deemed highly “intellectual.” However, the more I thought about it, the more I felt myself gravitating towards children’s books. Sure, I have read a lot (and that’s an understatement) of children’s books in my life, but I asked myself, have I ever analyzed a children’s book? In all my impressively long history of reading children’s books, I always read picture books for pure pleasure. I never delved below the shiny laminate illustration on the pages to examine the thinking, planning, research, and underlying messages that are required for a successful children’s book.

I am very satisfied with my final copy of Andy and the Lion. I chose to illustrate the book with simple drawings and occasional vivid splashes of color, which I think will appeal to children’s imaginations. I think it is evident that I painstakingly researched and read books in the genre, and I genuinely believe that the story is well-rounded.
browsing: Sarah models how she browses by, as Nancie Atwell recommends, “taking the top off of her head” (1998, 331). She demonstrates her browsing patterns by leading students to the section of the library reserved for short story collections. She talks aloud to them about her impressions of each book she pulls off the shelves as she reads the lead, skims the table of contents, and then flips through the book, noticing the presentation, the author blurb, and other techniques she uses for judging whether or not she is interested in each book, and then decides whether to return it to the shelf or to add it to the pile she will check out from the library. Throughout, she talks about how she chooses and suggests that if students notice that some samples in a genre interest them and others do not, that’s probably an indication that they are beginning to discern which samples will be their models; if they can’t find samples they want to read, they might want to look again at their highlighted list and consider another genre to study. As students begin their browsing, a number of them do switch their initial genre choice on this day; Sarah encourages them to continue spending sufficient time this first week deliberately and thoroughly browsing, pointing out to them that this is the time to decide on their genre of study. Once this week ends, she explains, they will not be allowed to switch their focus.

In addition to giving students time to browse and think about their unfamiliar genre choices, Sarah devotes time this first week to explaining the expectations for the project, encouraging them to locate their resources and write about their experiences in their research journals. Partway through the week, Sarah introduces a lesson designed to help students take an inventory of where they are in the project, what resources they have gathered, what resources they still need to gather, and where they might find even more resources. Students enter class to find the “Genre Scavenger Hunt” handout on their desks (shown in Figure 4.4).

This scavenger hunt has proved particularly successful for a couple of reasons: as students race the clock to see who can find the most answers, laughing as they go, we’re reminded that students always appreciate learning that has been turned into a game, especially a game like this that is both fun and offers some very specific instruction in how to explore their unfamiliar genre (instruction that, of course, can transfer to all kinds of research). In addition, as students work individually on the scavenger hunt, Sarah gets some time for one-on-one conferences, giving her an opportunity to check early on for deeper understanding. Sarah’s school has the advantage of a portable laptop lab on wheels, allowing her to provide each student with a computer to work on. Although it’s not essential, access to the Internet adds to the enthusiasm students bring to this lesson.
GENRE SCAVENGER HUNT

1. What’s your genre? Does it go by any other names?

2. Who are some famous or well-known authors/writers of your genre? (Name as many as you can.)

3. Where might you find information on the Internet about your genre?

4. What key words and phrases might you type into a search engine to find samples of your genre?

5. How and where might you find instructions for how to write in your genre on the Internet?

6. Where in the library might you look for samples of your genre?

7. Where in the library might you find instructional materials for how to write in your genre?

8. If you don’t know where to find information in the library, whom or where might you ask for help?

9. Is there any other place (bookstore, television, parent’s office, etc.) where you could find samples of your genre? Where?

10. Is there any other place (local newspaper, parent’s office, teacher, etc.) where you could find help writing in your genre?

11. Who are some local authors/writers of your genre? (Name as many as you can.)

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FIGURE 4.4. Genre Scavenger Hunt
This immersion into the project expectations and time to browse helps students prepare for their first formal writing of the UGP: the project proposal. Due at the end of the first week, the proposal lets students finalize their decision about which genre they will pursue for the next several weeks and celebrate their learning thus far. In order to write the proposal, students respond to the following questions:

- Which genre would you like to read and write in for your Unfamiliar Genre Project?
- What experiences, if any, do you have with reading or writing in this genre?
- What do you already know about this genre?
- Why are you choosing this genre?
- What would you like to learn by studying this genre and completing this project?

Given the presearch strategies in which they’ve been engaged for a full week, students generally find writing the proposal an easy task. (See Figure 4.5 for a sample student proposal.)

**Inquiring into Sample Genres**

“Now that we’ve decided on our genres and had time to begin some exploratory reading, I want you to be more purposeful with your reading into your chosen genres,” Sarah announces as she walks around the room at the beginning of the next week, handing out copies of a fictional news article she’s written for today’s lesson (shown in Figure 4.6). “This week we’re going to have a series of lessons designed to help you read into your genre. That is, we’re going to try to shift our attention from what your reading says to thinking about how it is said.”

For the first lesson in this series, the class begins by talking about defining characteristics: What makes a news story, for example, different from any other genre? As the class brainstorms a few obvious and more subtle characteristics, Sarah marks them on an overhead of the handout: columnar layout, short (often one-sentence) paragraphs, paragraph-long stand-alone quotes.

When it is clear that students are picking up the idea of defining characteristics, she then divides them into small, heterogeneous groups for an inquiry game. “The object of the game is to find the most characteristics of news arti-

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1Students especially enjoy this fictional piece authored by Notta Real Person because many of the names in the article are real: including their principal Arthur Williams.
Unpacking the Unfamiliar Genre Project

icles, no matter how small,” Sarah announces to the groups. “Here are the rules: For every characteristic you mark that no other group has noticed, you earn a point. You can block other groups from earning points by noting the same observations. Any questions? Are you ready? You have ten minutes. Go!”

As she mills around the room, glancing at students’ lists, she encourages the kids, reminding them that no detail is too minute. Eventually, she gives a two-minute warning and prepares to record all of their observations as well as the team scores on the list begun at the start of the period. Before the class is over, she also makes sure to leave enough time to distribute a second handout (shown in Figure 4.7), a copy of the original handout with the addition of thirty-six observations specific to news stories that she has identified. They compare the class list with the noted observations and applaud their items that aren’t included on the handout. As no group yet has come up with as many

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**SAMPLE PROJECT PROPOSAL BY MOLLY BOND**

*Which genre would you like to read and write in for your Unfamiliar Genre Project?*

I want to focus on personality profiles. I want to write about my good friend . . . who recently had knee surgery and doesn’t know what will happen with her athletic career.

*What experiences, if any, do you have with reading or writing in this genre?*

I have no experience with writing personality profiles.

*What do you already know about this genre?*

I know that you have to focus on one person and you interview the person and their friends and family.

*Why are you choosing this genre?*

I want to do another sports-related article, but I also think [my friend] is an amazing person and friend and would be interesting to write about.

*What would you like to learn by studying this genre and completing this project?*

I would like to be able to learn how to go about writing a good profile because knowing how to write different ways makes you that much more of a better writer.

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**Figure 4.5. Sample Project Proposal by Molly Bond**
News Story

As you read the following news article, think about its defining characteristics—what makes it a news story as opposed to a fictional story or an essay or a poem or a movie review?

Note your observations in the margins around the article.

Community service requirement
“a better idea than expected”

Notta Real Person
Reporter

After getting off to a rough start last spring, the community service requirement at Huron is gaining acceptance by staff and students. “I never thought the community service project would fly,” senior Eric Doe said. “But once I realized that I wasn’t going to get out of the requirement, I decided to try to have fun with it.”

Huron junior Eric Doe helps Logan Elementary student Tim Yu with an art project.

With the help of Social Studies Teacher Shu White, students have initiated community service projects from tutoring elementary students to painting murals to raking leaves around the community. “I knew that without strong teacher support, this program was going to have a tough time surviving,” White said. “The idea behind the program is too important to let it die.” However, not all students feel the requirement is worthwhile.

“I just don’t see how raking some lady’s leaves is educating me,” sophomore Eric Evans said. “This whole thing is pointless.”

Principal Arthur Williams presented the community service requirement to teachers in 2002. After three and a half years of negotiating and planning, the requirement was instituted for all grades last spring. “After the controversy of getting started, I’d say people now believe this is a better idea than expected,” Williams said.

What could you learn about writing news stories from reading this article?

Figure 4.6. Sample News Article
Anatomy of a News Story

ATTRIBUTION TIPS
Use said to emphasize the quote; don’t get fancy. Use stated when quoting a formal statement. Always be clear about WHO is talking. Place attributes after the first sentence of quotes. Avoid referring to the reporter as “When asked.”

HEADLINE CHECKLIST:
Use present tense. Use a comma in place of “and.” Separate complete thoughts with a semicolon. Keep all parts of a verb on one line. Keep adjectives and their nouns together. Use active verbs; omit form of the verb to be. Use alliteration sparingly (it gets old fast).

LEADS
Provide a brief summary. Put the key facts up top. Coax the reader to read. Tell the 5 Ws and How. Sometimes you can begin with a quote or a question but DON’T overdo it!

The body of a news story should alternate between attributed quotes and transitions. Transitions add information, explain, and help the story flow.

This paragraph is a quote that adds information. Use as many different quotes as possible. Preparing open-ended questions before you begin interviewing provides the best results. A good reporter gets the PEOPLE to tell the story. Don’t just ask your friends for quotes. Ask the people who are involved.

Each quote ALWAYS gets its own paragraph; NEVER bury quotes in the middle of a transition.

Avoid jargon, cliches, redundancies, sexist and otherwise inappropriate language.

COMMUNITY SERVICE REQUIREMENT “a better notion than expected”

Notta Real Person Reporter

“Some programs are worth the fight.”

Principal presented the requirement to teachers in 2002. After three and a half years of negotiating and planning, the requirement was instituted for all grades last spring.

“After a controversy,” said Mr. Williams, “I’d say people now believe this is a better idea than expected.” Williams said, “Some programs are worth the fight, and this is certainly one of them.”

This paraphrase is a transition flowing into the next quote.

Be sure to maintain quotes from all sides of the story.

Save old, less important, known, and or background information for the end of the story.

If a quote is used in a headline or highlighted as a pull quote, give the full context of the quote in the body of the story.

FIGURE 4.7. Sample News Article with Observations
notations as there are on the handout, they are amazed and impressed with what one can find when one looks carefully at a text—and this is a simple, two-hundred-word piece!

As students are quick to point out, Sarah’s version should be better; after all, she is experienced and comfortable with newswriting. Their work, they note, will be harder with an unfamiliar genre. We agree! The point of the lesson is that through the course of their research, students must read in their selected genres first to become familiar with the conventions, structures, layout, style, voice, strategies, and other defining characteristics used to craft them. Later, after students have analyzed and compared multiple samples of their chosen genres, they will begin to make the more complex and important discovery that while each genre looks and reads in a recognizable way, professional writers do not follow strict formulas; in fact, their ability to complicate the genre while keeping it recognizable marks their talent.

Sarah expects students to perform a variation of this lesson on each of the samples they have collected from the library and to use these observations to write each annotation for the required annotated bibliography, a lesson they’ll learn on another day (described later in the chapter).

**Beginning with the End: How-to Books**

One of the most concrete ways students pull together their new understandings of the qualities and characteristic of their genres for this project is through what Sarah calls how-to books. These small student-made booklets are designed to give students a structured space to put their findings about the nuances of the craft behind their genres. Through a series of minilessons, Sarah lays out a specific format for these books, beginning with the difference between content and craft.

“For today’s lesson, clear everything from your desk except one sample of your genre and the news article from yesterday’s game,” Sarah announces at the start of class. As she hands out six sheets of plain paper and thin markers to each student, she continues, “Today we’re going to start pulling together some of the observations you’ve been making about your individual genres.”

“The first step is an art project,” she continues. “We’re going to put all of our observations into a how-to book.” Sarah walks the students through folding their pages hamburger-style, so that they each have a twenty-four-page booklet. Staplers make their way around the room so that each student can place two staples in the spine of his book.

Sarah asks students to title their book *How to Write a _____ by _____*, inserting their chosen genre and their own name (e.g., *How to Write a Short Story by Yasmeen Mohammad*). As she gives students a bit of time to use the markers to make fancy covers, she walks around the room to help make sure staples are
in place. This time also helps resistant students begin to soften to the idea of their task: to deconstruct this genre they’ve only begun to study and that, by nature of the project, is unfamiliar to them.

When she’s sure every student has a stapled book, Sarah begins: “Open your how-to book to its first facing pages. Label the left side, the inside cover, ‘page 1’ with the title ‘Content: What Your Reading Said.’” (See Figure 4.8 for the first few pages of one student’s how-to book.) On the board, she has drawn a mockup of the facing pages to help students visualize this process. “It’s really important for the layout of this book that your notes on these pages face each other. Label the right page ‘page 2’ with the title ‘Craft: How They Said It.’” This distinction between content and craft is an easy concept for some students, but others need a concrete illustration. It’s easiest to use a short, common text in a familiar genre for this illustration. (Sarah often uses the news article from the previous day’s game; in the student sample we offer here, she used an article from *English Journal* titled “Don’t Blame the Boys, We’re Giving Them Girly Books,” by St. Jarre [2008].) Together, the class brainstorms (as Sarah records the observations on the board) what the common text is about and then begins a discussion of how it is written, moving between the two pages as students begin to discern the difference between content and craft. Students copy these notes onto pages 1 and 2 of their handbooks. When using the news article from the inquiry game as the example, Sarah helps students fold and tape the second handout (with all of her annotations in the margins) directly onto the second (right-hand) page.

The class finishes the period with time for each student to label the next set of facing pages in the booklet “Content in [my sample’s title]” and “Craft in [my sample’s title].” (In the student how-to book included here, her sample’s title is *Rich Part in Life.*) The remaining class time and their homework is devoted to applying today’s discussion to the model sample (in their chosen genre) they brought with them to class; they are to distinguish between what their sample says and, very generally, how it is written.

On the following day, students bring more samples of their genre and their how-to book to class. As the class settles in, Sarah winds around the room, checking that they understood the difference between content and craft for their own sample (their homework on pages 3–4). On the board, she has drawn diagrams of two sets of facing pages and numbered them 5 through 8. Also on the board (off to the side, in a section that will not be wiped clean), she has a table of contents for the how-to book that she expects will guide her mini-lessons for the next few weeks (as shown in pages 1–4 of Figure 4.9).

They begin class with a general discussion of their experiences with their homework and a review of the differences between content and craft.

“Now that we’ve shared our observations from last night, I’d like for us to think carefully about some of the decisions writers make when working. We’re going to walk through some of the considerations writers ponder. First we’ll
FIGURE 4.8. From "How to Write a Novel" by Min Liu
## HOW-TO BOOK CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Content: What Your Reading Says</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Craft: How They Said It</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Content in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Craft in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Audience in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Purpose in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Organization in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Presentation in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Voice in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Word Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Word Choice in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sentence Fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Sentence Fluency in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Proofreading and Style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Proofreading and Style Considerations in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Leads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Lead in [genre sample’s title]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.9. How-to Book Contents**
discuss what these are, then we'll think about how each relates to your particular genre, and finally we'll think about how you will deal with each in the piece you are writing.”

You'll notice that Sarah has adapted several of these considerations—listed in the table of contents—from Vicki Spandel's *Creating Writers Through 6-Trait Writing Assessment and Instruction* (2001). Just as we hope teachers will create their own versions of the Unfamiliar Genre Project, Sarah has made adaptations to the six traits rubric. As we discussed in Chapter 3, her version renames some of Spandel’s categories, emphasizing the variations in each trait depending on the genre at hand. The how-to book demonstrates for students in a hands-on way how those variations play out in their chosen genre.

Several of the two-page spreads in the how-to book then are devoted to a specific trait of writing: content, organization, presentation, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and proofreading. The goal for students will be to identify what the trait means in general terms, and then identify the specifics of that trait for their genre, much as they just did with the content versus craft distinction. (Notably, proofreading is largely the same among genres, but Sarah calls her students' attention to the special style considerations that relate to individual genres: the differences between Internet and print, journalistic style, or MLA, for example.) Other pages in the book are devoted to other considerations for writers: audience and purpose, leads, and any other writing mini-lessons Sarah plans for the unit. (Any additional writing lessons you want to include will require additional pages in the booklet; it’s best to plan ahead for this scenario!)

The general procedure for introducing any of these traits or considerations is the same: “Let’s start on page 5 of your how-to book. Go ahead and label that page ‘Audience,’” Sarah narrates as she models it on the demonstration-size version she drew on the board. “So—remind me what audience is again,” she teases as she segues into the lesson.

“It’s the reader,” Brendan pipes up.

“OK. Do you pay attention to who your reader is when you’re writing?” The students give examples and little stories about considering their audiences. “And what about the readers’ expectations? What do they need? What do they want from this piece? What will they be looking for?” Sarah leads the class to think about the newspaper example, and students are quick to identify the school’s students as its primary audience, dependent on their attitudes toward the implications of the service-learning proposal. They also cite teachers, administrators, and parents as secondary or tertiary audiences.

“Now look at one or two of your model samples. Who is the audience for each?” Sarah continues, “Remember to label the sample you’re using.” As students begin reading and writing, they ask questions that lead them to compli-
cate the idea of audience as they consider the notion of multiple audiences for their sample pieces. We sometimes share with them an example of multiple audiences you may remember from Chapter 3—when students discovered that standardized test writing could have primary and secondary audiences. While the test makers identified one audience for the students to address in their writing (an imaginary school board, for example), the students quickly realized that the real audience was the assessors of the test.

“Now, I’d like for you to think about the draft you’re about to write. Who is your audience? In which publication do you imagine your piece will appear?” Students draw a line across the bottom of the two-page spread and make notes about their own audiences and the needs of those audiences. (See pages 5 and 6 of Figure 4.10 for sample pages of another student how-to book. On page 5, the class analyzed a classmate’s poem entitled “Best Friends by Default.”)

As students finish, Sarah continues: “Audience quickly leads us to purpose, which we’ll explore on page 7. So, what do we mean when we talk about the purpose of your writing?”

---

**FIGURE 4.10. How-to Book Pages on Audience from “How to Write a Eulogy” by Ran Ji**

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>In “Great God of Dogs”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition: listener/reader</td>
<td>1° Great God of Dogs Himself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1° People addressed</td>
<td>2° other family members who loved the dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2° Public readers</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3° Publisher</td>
<td>Funeral attendees (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Taylor’s “Best Friends by Default”</td>
<td>3° Editor of anthology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1° Judges - Experienced slam poets</td>
<td>Publisher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience members</td>
<td>Anthology readers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2° BFF</td>
<td>In “Piggie”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>“Dumbo”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other competing poets, “City-Wide”</td>
<td>“Dana”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s &lt; others</td>
<td>1° me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmates</td>
<td>Mike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3° City-wide slam</td>
<td>2° classmates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National slam</td>
<td>Mrs. Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5° “My kids”</td>
<td>3° Mrs. Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classmates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5° Those in similar situation as me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For each of the two-page spreads in the how-to book, Sarah is careful to draw characterizations out of the students rather than explain the definitions, to help them construct their own understandings of the concept. Then, they analyze the class example (such as the newspaper article) before she sets them off on their own to examine the model samples they are using and finally to think about how they are or will address each area in their own draft. Sarah tends to pair related concepts (audience and purpose, organization and presentation, voice and word choice, presentation and style) in fifteen- to twenty-minute minilessons over the next weeks. She reserves the rest of each class period for workshop in which students are allowed to find and follow their own research and writing processes. Five minutes before the class is due to end, she announces the time and encourages students to make an entry in their research journals. “Write about what you did today, but more importantly, write about what you noticed, what you thought about as you were working.”

In addition to helping students recognize the distinctive qualities of their own genre, the how-to books help students understand the qualities of good writing that extend across genres. Brendan expresses this understanding when he writes in his research journal: “The How-To booklet reminded me that photojournalism is not so different from other genres, even feature articles and opinion columns. For example, a photo essay hardly has any written words, but it still uses leads like all other articles—the leads are simply pictures and captions instead of quotes and paragraphs.”

**Putting It All Together: The Annotated Bibliography**

Perhaps the most traditional part of the UGP is the preparation of an annotated bibliography. We believe students should know how to use a bibliographic form, but—as any of us who teach research skills knows—it can be difficult to make lessons in bibliography lively and exciting for students. By staying consistent with a genre approach to teaching, however, Sarah has figured out a way to keep students invested and make these entries come alive. Sarah designs her lessons on writing annotations as a mini genre study: the class collectively immerses itself in past students’ work, inquires into how the annotations were written, receives some instruction about annotated bibliographies, and discusses ways in which annotations are similar to and different from other genres the students use.

On the first day of this series of lessons, Sarah provides a handout with a variety of student-written annotations from past UGPs (see Figure 4.11). Some of these samples are stronger than others, which reinforces students’ awareness that they can learn not only from what’s included in a piece of writing but also...
What makes an annotation good? As we immerse ourselves in these samples of the genre, inquire into how each was written. Ask yourself: What in this sample is helpful to me? What else do I want to know? How was this sample put together? What can I learn from this sample? How does it compare with the others? (The following annotations were written by high school students for the Unfamiliar Genre Project and are directly quoted from their projects, errors and all.)

**Bailey Yi: Political Pamphlets**


One of the most influential pamphlets in American history, Paine’s Common Sense is most certainly a masterpiece of persuasion and coercion. In his eloquence, Paine leads the reader from the concept of natural rights to the Bible to the contemporary state of American affairs. As you arrive at the end of the piece, you would not carry any doubt of Paine’s assertions, for the path from which you came has become narrower and narrower, to a point where all possible objections are addressed and the opinion thoroughly supported. It is as if Paine was building this piece up for such an effect. This piece is an excellent example of a well-written political pamphlet, and helped me immensely with composing my own.

**Brian Li: Novels**


The book probably influenced me the most even though I did not read all of it. I liked the approach of the future going back. I like the fact that everything has already happened when the story starts and the main character looks back and describes things. Later it turns into the present tense.

(continues)
### VARIOUS STUDENT ANNOTATIONS FOR THE UGP (Continued)

**Notes (in brief)**
- First person
- Tragic
- Romantic
- A different blend of different things, lots of items in the story
- Suspension keeps the reader waiting

#### Allison Reid: Sports Columns


This is included because, quite frankly, it is absolutely terrible (a “what not to do”). Jason A. Martin does take a strong stand but then awkwardly alternates between informal and formal tone. The story, if it can even be called one, states that the New York Yankee’s aura is becoming more ordinary and less elite than it has been in the past. But Martin is unsuccessful at backing up his accusations. Since when do two trips to the World Series in less than seven years mean failure? The article leaves the reader with brows furrowed, working much too hard to decipher Martin’s meanings. It’s no wonder he’s self-published.

#### Chelsea Froning: Songs


This song has a more complicated accompaniment part than many of the songs I have been listening to, but it sounds deceivingly simple. The melody is in a major key in the chorus, but in a minor key in the verses. As a result, the song sounds mellow and a little sad. The lyrics are basically reminiscing about past good times, and saying that you should enjoy the present. This is a fairly typical topic for songs, but it is always catchy and appeals to the audience. It is organized as more of a speech than a story, because the singer is trying to convince the

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Figure 4.11. (Continued)
listener to enjoy the present, which causes the song to have a persuasive presentation. The word choice and voice are informal and simple, which makes the song seem more typical and still appeal to the listener. I would like to try to incorporate the switching between major keys and minor keys into my writing.

**Chris Berloth: Movie Reviews**

Example #2 The Forgotten
Written by: James Berardinelli

The more I read the review the less I enjoyed it and the less I thought it covered the main points that it should have. All this author does is destroy the movie the entire time, he doesn’t talk about the cast much, he defiantly doesn’t talk about the comparison to other movies, and never says whether he thinks the plot was original or not. I believe that all he had intentions to do was to take all the bad thoughts about this movie he could and put them into writing. I believe the reason he left out certain points is because it would make the movie look better than what he thought it was. Isn’t a movie review supposed to tell people about the entire movie, not just the bad parts?

**Albert Cheng: Parodies**

Animal Farm—

This book is a very famous parody of the Russian Revolution that I believe we are going to read [in class] very soon. This is also one of the few parodies that isn’t concentrating on humor, but instead, is concentrating on telling what happened during a historical event. Another thing that separates this parody from others is that it uses animals to represent the historical figures. I found this technique of substituting animals for humans very amazing. Any reader who knows anything about the Russian Revolution will immediately start making comparisons of Napoleon to Stalin, Snowball to Trotsky, Old Major to Karl Marx, etc. because the author, George Orwell, has done such a great job writing this book. However, as great of a literature work Animal Farm is, I really didn’t get much out of it that would help me write my own parody because my story is based on humor and a fairy tale, not a great historical event.

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from what is not present. Together, Sarah and her students discuss the content as well as the craft of each sample annotation, compiling a list of what an annotation is, what it typically includes, and how to write one. Just as they have done with other genres, they are quick to discern the differences between those annotations that are useful and those that are less so.

Sarah closes the class by asking students to transfer what they’ve learned from this first lesson to their own attempt at annotations. “Tonight’s homework is to start a first draft of the annotations for your five to ten model samples. You’ll have two nights to do this, but it’s a lot of work, so I don’t want you to put it off. At the beginning of class tomorrow, I’ll check that you have at least two annotations written and then you’ll have a complete first draft due the following day. Tomorrow we’re going to practice conferring our annotations, so I want you to be realistic about what a good first draft looks like.”

As promised, the next day Sarah walks around the room, checking students’ progress and handing out copies of a first draft that one of her students wrote, which the class is about to discuss.

“OK, you guys, here is a sample of a first draft of an annotated bibliography by Katie that we are going to look at together.” (See Figure 4.12.) “Yesterday we looked at some examples of annotations. For our second day of looking at annotations, we’re going to look at this strong first draft while thinking about writing our own annotations. Think about this draft in terms of What do I like? What is useful to me? What would I like to know more about? What would I encourage the writer of this annotated bibliography to add?” She has moved to the front of the class, where an overhead of the handout awaits on the projector.

“So here’s the title of Katie’s draft: ‘Annotated Bibliography: Independent Genre Project.’ I would like to know which genre we’re talking about here, and so in the title I would like to know that it’s for an in-depth feature,” Sarah models as she starts out the whole-class conference. The room is silent as students copy Sarah’s notes and visibly search for something to say.

“What is the first thing that you notice, just looking at the page? Not having read a thing on the page yet, presentation-wise, what do you see?” Sarah encourages.

“It’s single-spaced,” a voice calls out.

“One paragraph per annotation.”

“It’s not indented. There’s no tab.”

“That’s right. The whole paragraph is indented. How does that look to you?” Sarah encourages.

“It’s easier to read.”
Unpacking the Unfamiliar Genre Project

FIGURE 4.12. Selections from Katie Strode’s Annotated Bibliography

SELECTIONS FROM KATIE STRODE’S ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annotated Bibliography
Independent Genre Project


This article is about a feud between two doctors that started when one used an artificial heart from the lab of the other in a transplant. I think it sits on the line between news and feature articles, because it tells a story and there’s a lot of extraneous information. However, it is also pretty newsworthy because the feud just ended—that’s the reason the article was even written.


The ‘they’ that the title of this article refers to is autistic adults. It’s not specifically about one person, but it does refer to several different people continually throughout the article. This seems to be a common way to write a feature article that focuses on a group of people. It’s fairly long, at seven pages, and includes lots of graphics, photos, and pull quotes. There is also a shorter, related article included near the end, which also seems to be a common thing to do with feature articles. This article was the cover story.


This article, also a cover story, is six pages long and has lots of graphics. It’s written in a way that doesn’t refer to the time or date, but it’s probably fairly recent, given the up-to-date research that it refers to. The article could have been written two weeks ago or two months ago—it’s ambiguous in this way. Like feature articles tend to be, it’s a ‘soft’ news story. It’s not about an event, but rather something that people might find interesting.

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Figure 4.12. Selections from Katie Strode’s Annotated Bibliography
“It’s almost like when you have an outline and you have main information and the smaller point indents in.”

“That’s an important observation. You all are doing great! Big picture: Anything else about the presentation?” Sarah asks.

“MLA.”

“First the citation, then the paragraph.”

“Yes. Good. And how about this?” Sarah circles the first letter of each entry.

“The entries are in alphabetical order.”

“What if there wasn’t an author?” Sarah asks.

“Then you just go by the first letter of the title.”

“For a first draft, how does it look?” Sarah wraps up.

“It looks good.”

“Really good.”

“I agree,” Sarah says. “OK, so let’s look at each of the works cited. You can tell the writer used an MLA helper site. It’s all consistent and has all the needed information.”

“It’s not just lists of the websites.”

“Yes. Remember that yesterday we had some examples that just gave the title of the sample, and maybe the author’s name, and we decided that’s not enough. If I were having a conference on a draft like that, I would recommend that they get it into MLA style,” Sarah says.

“OK, so now let’s look at an actual annotation.” She begins reading aloud: “This article is about a feud. . . .” As the class discusses three of the annotations in this first draft, Sarah is careful to draw advice out of the students rather than lecture at them.

Based on this discussion, Sarah’s students come up with this list of recommendations for writing annotations:

An annotation should:

• be a four- to ten-sentence paragraph

• summarize the article’s content in the first sentence or two and then comment on that content; the rest of the annotation should comment on how the sample was written

• discuss how the sample influenced you, or what it taught you

• discuss how the sample was written, its craft—that’s the whole point

• discuss the point of view of the sample

• not cover every single aspect of how the article was written, just the important or influential ways; if you don’t have something to say, don’t pretend—just explain why you put this sample in your bibliography
focus on what was either really good and/or really bad about the sample
be really specific; it’s OK to give examples from your sample as long as you give your reader enough information to understand you
act as a kind of a minireview; your opinion belongs in an annotation

The next day, Sarah’s students confer on a first draft of their annotated bibliography with a small group of classmates. As the minilesson on this workshop day, Sarah shares with the class the revision of the previous day’s first draft (shown in Figure 4.13). They are impressed with how much this strong draft improved, based on the class’ comments.

Drafting the Centerpiece: Putting Research in Action

These experiments in how-to books and annotated bibliographies are intended to help students break down the genre, but also to serve as—albeit complex—prewriting activities. In producing both documents, students have to think hard about the essence of their genre and articulate the qualities that help define that genre, a first step toward composing their own piece. In other words, their immersion in the nitty-gritty of their genre and their instruction in how to read the craft of their genre helps students feel comfortable with what was previously unfamiliar. The next step, then, is to demonstrate their new understanding by composing their own attempt at the genre in question. Sarah runs this part of the project as a typical writing workshop: students work largely on their own and at their own pace as they move through various stages of their writing process to pull together their best attempt at writing in the genre. Over the years students have impressed on Sarah just how fundamentally important it is that they write their centerpiece in this unfamiliar genre on a familiar topic, one they are committed to, one they care deeply about. Chelsea, who wrote an original song, speaks to many students’ experiences:

I had no idea where to start with writing my own melody or my own words. . . . [But] after figuring out what my song was going to be, I had no trouble writing first the chorus, then the verses of my final piece. They fit perfectly with the melody I had written, and . . . I learned that all I needed to write well was a topic that I care about. I realize now that the reason I had so much trouble getting started was the fact that I just hadn’t found the right subject.
REVISED SELECTIONS FROM KATIE STRODE’S ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annotated Bibliography

In-Depth Feature Articles


This article tells the story of a feud between two doctors that began when one doctor used an artificial heart from the lab of the other doctor in a transplant. I think it sits on the line between news and feature articles, because it tells a story and there’s a lot of extra information that isn’t necessarily relevant. However, it is also pretty newsworthy because the feud just ended—that’s the reason the article was even written. In terms of the way it was written, I liked it a lot. It doesn’t jump around or start at the end or any of that other silly journalistic stuff. It just starts at the very beginning and works its way to the present. If I end up writing an article that specifically tells a story, I think that’s how I would do it.


The ‘they’ that the title of this article refers to is autistic adults. It’s not specifically about one person, but it does refer to several different people continually throughout the article. This seems to be a common way to write a feature article that focuses on a group of people. It’s fairly long, at seven pages, and includes lots of graphics, photos, and pull quotes. There is also a shorter, related article called a Figure included near the end. Including a Figure is a common thing to do with feature articles. This article was the cover story. I have a lot more to say about the craft of this article because I enjoyed reading it, which is always something to keep in mind for my article—interesting, engaging articles hold readers better than any sort of gimmick or fancy graphic. (They do help, though.)


This article, also a cover story, is six pages long and has lots of illustrations and charts. Obviously, it’s an article about what in the human brain makes us moral creatures. An interesting Figure that was included had several hypothetical situations designed to test human morality with hard situations. Figures can be interactive—it makes them more interesting. The article is written in a way that doesn’t refer to the time or date, but it’s probably fairly recent, given the up-to-date research that it refers to. The article could have been written two weeks ago or two months ago—it’s got a longer shelf life. Like feature articles tend to be, it’s a ‘soft’ news story. It’s not about an event, but rather something that people might find interesting.

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While students generally use workshop time wisely, Chelsea’s familiar concern—What am I going to write about?—initially blocks some students. To light a sometimes much-needed fire under those students, Sarah holds an idea conference day early in the unit. At this conference, students are invited to either share their beginning drafts, talk through their experiences so far in the project, or float their ideas for their centerpiece with a medium-size group. On the board, Sarah writes out a protocol to use for each participant: explain your genre and what you’ve learned so far, ask for the help you need, share your draft or idea for your draft, receive feedback with an open mind, articulate your next steps. If possible, Sarah schedules this conference on a day when one or two preservice teachers will be visiting so that the class can divide into two or three medium-size groups, each facilitated by an adult who keeps the group on task while making sure every student has a turn and gets specific suggestions. It’s important that these groups be large enough that the student who is sharing gets plenty of feedback from a variety of peers and can hear a range of students discuss an assortment of genres at various places in the process, but small enough that all students in the group will have a turn. It’s also best to schedule this idea conference in plenty of time for students to complete a first draft for the scheduled due date, but close enough that there is a sense of immediacy in students’ plans for next steps.

Once students settle on a topic, they spend most of their class time drafting and revising their pieces. In true workshop fashion, Sarah continues to start each class with some sort of minilesson, usually about process and craft—focusing on lessons that cross multiple genres and that arise mostly from the challenges she sees her students facing.

In the midst of this drafting and revising, a subtle shift in the atmosphere of the class often becomes apparent: students become increasingly engaged by their projects. As they move back and forth between their newfound knowledge of their genre and their ideas for the piece they’re writing, they begin to see this very large undertaking come together in some exciting ways. They feel knowledgeable about their projects, proud of that knowledge, and ready to take on the challenge of revising in some authentic ways. Megan, who anticipates becoming a scientist, decided to try her hand at science articles. She explains,

My first attempt at writing a journal article was dismal. I had created a research summary, without synthesizing the information. It was not at all close to what I had read so many of, and my audience was confused. . . . I changed how I saw the information that I was looking for in the articles I was reading. . . . After going over my very helpful notes about how the author probably went from raw information to accessible material, I tried again and got high praise.
Once students reach this point of excitement toward their chosen genre, once they are able to compose and revise their own piece that represents their best shot at writing in that genre, Sarah introduces the multiple conferences that are an essential part of the final project. Sarah requires students to confer with at least three individuals during the process: a classmate, an important adult, and her. Why three conferences? She wants students to have the experience of getting multiple responses, thinking hard about what to do with sometimes conflicting feedback, and learning how to ask for the kinds of responses that will be helpful to them as writers.

Knowing how difficult it can sometimes be for students to push themselves and their peers to offer that thoughtful and sound advice, she introduces a minilesson that teaches (or reteaches) students how to confer. Using a piece of her own writing, Sarah models what she expects of her students: she reads her piece aloud (projected on the overhead), asks for advice, and translates the students’ feedback into notes she writes directly on the draft. Sarah then asks students to put on their metacognitive hats: Was this a successful conference? If so, what made it successful? Students brainstorm a list of ideas of what they noticed that led to the conference’s success, focusing on behaviors from both the writer and the readers. Usually they come up with ideas like these: as the author, Sarah resisted defensiveness, she asked for what she needed, and she worked hard to understand all the suggestions; the best readers listened hard to what Sarah was trying to accomplish as a writer and offered clear and concrete suggestions. They then talk about general strategies to make their own conferences successful: ideas such as reading papers aloud and taking notes, for example, rather than just trading papers and never actually talking.

Experience has taught Sarah that as the due date for the UGP nears, she needs to make extra time for both the student-student and student-teacher conferences. Because students consistently tell her that they genuinely appreciate the one-on-one time, she offers writing conferences before school, during lunch, and after school in addition to in-class workshop time. Increasingly, Sarah builds in additional workshop days to accommodate conference requests in the two weeks before the project is due.

Sarah also asks students to practice conferring with their parents or an important adult. Although at first this seems like a risk (even though it’s a required portion of the final submission), students and adults have risen to the occasion. With plenty of conference experience now behind them, students teach their parents how to confer—just as they have done in class—and in turn get suggestions from very interested adults. And when parents (or other adults in their lives) make time for the students and students have learned how to ask for useful advice, these conferences tend to be especially productive, covering ideas and content as well as craft and proofreading.
Three conferences, then, help the students with this task of revising. As they continue making changes and getting to the point of final polishing, they’re ready to display their centerpiece writing: their best effort at putting into practice all they’ve learned about their genre.

Reflecting on the Experience

When the final draft is polished and the project is coming to a close, we want students to reflect on their experience, to articulate for themselves all they’ve learned. Once again, the research journal is an invaluable tool for this reflection. When students use it regularly throughout their work, each entry serves as a snapshot of the students’ thinking and provides concrete evidence of growth. As students compose these reflective letters, they often cite these journals, noting that they weren’t aware of how much they had changed as readers, writers, and researchers until they looked back at their first entries and remembered again their struggles with how to even get started. In the project overview, the reflective letter is described this way:

The last piece you’ll write for this project is your reflective letter. Consider your experience over the weeks of this project. Reread your journals. Reread your drafts and experimental writing. Reread your notes on your reading. With all this in mind, think about what you’ve learned about reading in this project. What have you learned about writing? What have you learned about studying genres and researching in general? Your reflective letter should discuss your experiences with reading, writing, your research process, and metacognition. In each of these sections, make big-picture conclusions from your experience.

Just as Sarah introduces other aspects of this project using the tools of immersion, inquiry, instruction, and integration, she shares past students’ reflective letters in order to draw out of her students what might be involved in writing this genre of reflection.

“I’m going to share with you a couple of final reflective letters,” Sarah starts the period.

“I was going to ask you about that. I wanted to read some examples,” Austin replies.

Sarah smiles. Austin’s comment lets her know that her students are incorporating these tools for genre study—especially immersion—into their thinking. “Yeah! So let’s read a couple.”

Sarah puts the first letter on the overhead (see Figure 4.14), and as the class discusses it, Sarah focuses students’ attention on metacognition and the purpose of their reflections: “Why would I ask you to write about your metacognition in...
I can safely say that this unfamiliar genre project has been one of the most frustrating but fulfilling one that I have ever done in my life. The project helped me push my horizons into unknown territory and helped me stimulate a new growing passion for poetry. My poetry skills were rudimentary at best before this project and I never thought that I would be able to do as well as I did. Because of this increase in growth I have gained many new opportunities that I can use in the future.

In order to write the best Haikus that I could, I did a number of things. I exchanged heavy rock music for jazz as heavy rock doesn’t quite suit Haikus and went for “Haiku Walks” where I just walk to a place and watch people or nature. You notice a lot of actions that you would not have noticed otherwise when you just sit still and breathe in Mother Nature. An example, I was sitting on the bench, when a man walked by with a small white dog, who I called Spot for obvious reasons. He was sniffing everywhere and when he came next to an ant hill, I saw ants disappearing in a flash. If I was not writing a Haiku, I would have never seen that visual imagery and furthermore, might not even notice the dog. As I was writing my Spot Haiku, I realized that writing in set syllables can be quite hard especially when the words that “flow” do not have the right syllables. Sometime, you have too many syllables, and that’s where free-verse comes in. It allows the Haiku writer freedom to write with as many syllables and lines he/she wants. Ultimately, I still found it more fun to write in traditional form as it has something structured, which I really like, and presents more of a challenge.

The most respected Japanese haiku masters wrote in the Japanese traditional form even though a few did free-form. Through the readings of many translated books, I gathered that not only did Japanese Masters write in the traditional form, most of them write with a season word, usually spring floods or cherry

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**SAMPLE REFLECTIVE LETTER BY NORMAN ZENG**

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**Figure 4.14. Sample Reflective Letter by Norman Zeng**
blossoms. Researching this, I found that a season word was one of the requirements and so was a Ki, which has no English translation, so most English haiku writers use punctuation instead even though it is not as effective. Reading was one of the easy parts of the project, the haikus of both past and present were enjoyable and some were even so good that I had to read them multiple times. I can only strive and hope that one day I can be as good as these masters of haiku, both past and present. Even though my research was fruitful, it was not as extensive as I would have liked, I only researched parts that would help with my writing. Looking at some of the past projects of Ms. Andrew's students, I saw that they researched way more in depth than me even though that research did nothing to help the student write their genres. I stayed away from that and now I regret it as I found a couple tidbits that made me realize that the history of how Haiku was formed is a very interesting one.

In the end I realized that haikus make me look at the world in a different view, or it at least opened a different viewpoint for me, taking or using that viewpoint is of course up to me. Some of the best haikus throw you to the extremes of your emotional range, some make you feel happy and content, while other make you sad and realize that the world is not perfect, even if you want it to be. Throughout the project and culminating in this final reflection I realized that the Haiku is a mystical tool that has many different wonderful effects for the writer and reader. Many of these are unexplainable and can only be experienced by reading the exceptional and unique poetry form, Haiku.

Norman Zeng

Glance into the day—
Sleepy and happy yawn
Inconsequential.

—Norman Zeng

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this project? Well, I want to know how you were thinking as you were learning
this genre for the first time. What things were you paying attention to? What
were the lightbulb moments? What were your moments of complete confusion
and frustration, and how did you work your way out of those times?”

After Sarah finishes reading, she asks her students what they noticed. A fe-
male voice from the back of the room begins a series of callouts.
“It’s your opinion.”
“Your reflections.”
“Your voice.”
“Do you want us to be that casual?”
“Yes, you can be that casual. This does not have to be a formal essay. I want
you to be thorough and thoughtful, of course. It’s fun for me to read your
voice,” Sarah responds.
“Can we work on these today?”
“Yes. We’ll read one more and then you can work for the rest of the period on
your own reflection. Chris wrote this reflection when he was a ninth grader.” Sarah
begins to read sections aloud from another sample projected on the overhead:
“‘The research for this project was long and frustrating.’ Can anybody relate?”
“Oh yeah.”
“I can.”
Sarah continues reading parts of Chris’ letter: “‘I don’t think I could have
picked many more genres that were as time consuming as this.’ How many of
you feel this way?”
Lots of hands go up; others smile broadly.
“You can absolutely talk about your frustrations as well as your successes,”
Sarah assures them. “I think you know me well enough to know that I under-
stand that this can be frustrating, and that’s OK. I want to know about your
frustrations and how you worked through them.”
“So it’s OK to show our personality in our voice?” a male student wonders.
“Absolutely. It will really help you to go back and reread your research
journals, which is a kind of raw data of how you were thinking, and for this re-
fection, you’ll synthesize that into a single, informal essay, an extended research
journal that sums it all up. OK? Get to work.”

Student reflections continually amaze us. The students’ honesty and in-
sights about both the UGP and what they’ve learned as writers help us know
just how valuable this teaching approach can be.

**Letter from an Important Adult**

When the project is compiled into a binder, complete with tabs for each sec-
tion, Sarah asks her students to do one more thing before they hand in their
UGP: share their completed project with their parents or another important adult. Every teacher (and everyone who has ever parented a teenager) knows how difficult it is to keep communication flowing among parents, students, and teachers during those high school years. The 100 percent participation that was the norm for parents during curriculum nights in elementary school dwindles each year, and, as a result, it’s often hard to tell if parents are clued into the ins and outs of their teens’ school day.

Parents are busy; teens are busy establishing their independence from home. And yet, we know how important this communication is—both between parents and their students and between parents and teachers. Sarah has, through the UGP, found one way to keep open the conversational lines, by inviting students to ask their parents (or another adult who is important in their life) to take a moment to respond to their work. As a required part of this project, students must find an interested adult to read and respond—not to the teacher, but to the teen.

Over the years, Sarah has found this to be an invaluable part of the project. At conferences, parents have thanked her, telling her that it was the first school assignment their children had shared all year. And students are aware that they have yet one more audience for the project.

Sarah introduces this part of the assignment in this way: “Today we’re going to talk about one kind of response to the UGP, a letter from an important adult—a parent, an older sibling, your neighbor, anyone whom you are close to or you would like to share your hard work with. After the person reads your work, I want you to ask this person to write a letter to you about what he or she noticed in your project. This is not a letter to me. I do not want your parents to write me, saying, ‘Ms. Andrew, my student deserves an A because . . .’ Rather, this is a chance for someone who is important to you to sit down, look at your project, and respond to the hard work you are doing in this class.”

As Sarah continues with the introduction, she explains to the students that she is aware that asking parents to read their work might be a little unusual and even uncomfortable for them. She explains, “I get that it’s good that your parents don’t have to look over your shoulder and make sure that you are doing your homework, but it’s nice for them to get a sense of what you’re doing at school. As a parent, I like to know what my kids are doing at school.” And she assures them that they don’t need to worry that their parents’ writing isn’t good enough. She says, “I’ve had parents write in their home language to their child, and that’s fine. It doesn’t matter because it’s not to me; it’s to you, the student, and whatever words they choose, those are the right words for that audience!”

The letters don’t need to be fancy. Sarah shares one from a parent, pointing out that it’s not formal, not revised, just a letter from parent to teen. Some parents type them up, but more often they’re on lined paper, written in pencil or pen. (See Figure 4.15 for one parent’s letter.)
Dear ________,

Thank you for sharing your English project with me. I always appreciate any opportunity that helps me to know you better. I think writing, by its very nature, is one of the best forms of communication. Unlike spontaneous conversation, it tends to be more thoughtful and purposeful. I’m assuming this was the case when you wrote “Dual Dance.” So, you can only imagine my ambivalence when I read this piece of writing. ________, you are a good writer! You say it is hard for you—I know you prefer to read—but your efforts certainly pay off. I was immediately caught up in the story—you had my undivided attention by the third line. And, then, you held my interest throughout the entire story. I couldn’t wait to see how it ended. Of course, I was horrified by it. How awful that this child should die.

As a mother, this story raises all kinds of red flags. My gut response was to believe that this is somewhat autobiographical. I had to fight the urge to start paging through the yellow pages in search of a good counselor. I don’t know, ________, I sense a lot of underlying anger and hurt in this character. Maybe we have some ongoing issues that we haven’t resolved. Maybe this is purely fiction and I am over-reacting. I need you to help me figure it out.

My other thought is that Ms. Andrew is a wonderful teacher. When I went to school—back in the dark ages, before they had discovered the printing press—my teacher would not have accepted this work. I would have to have written a traditional short story, well developed in every way, to have completed the assignment. I also would have been asked to read a collection of famous authors—certainly not anything as contemporary as what you’ve read. I’m glad you’ve had the chance to explore these current authors. I know you’re capable of understanding and discussing all those other “high brow” types as well.

I will look forward to some kind of follow up discussion about your project.

Thanks for including me on this.

Mom

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FIGURE 4.15. Parent Letter to a Student Who Studied Short Stories
Assessment

The success of projects like the UGP depends on multiple assessments along the way, both formal and informal. Daily in class, Sarah conducts check-ins with the students, asking them to show her their progress on gathering and annotating their samples, keeping up with their how-to books, drafting and revising their genre exemplars. Sometimes these check-ins take the form of a simple question (“How’s it going today? Who had a success or a challenge?”), sometimes Sarah literally checks students off in her grade book, and often students share their progress in the form of whole-class or one-on-one conferences. Vital to the assessment process, these check-ins serve a dual purpose: first, they help keep students on track and moving along, a necessary component of a project that is this big and in which each step builds upon the last. Most students, despite some good-natured grumbles, understand and appreciate the importance of these along-the-way deadlines: clear expectations and a clear time frame ease the fears of taking on such a big and unfamiliar project. That said, anticipate that not all students will be prepared for every check, which leads to an equally important reason for these check-ins: the information they offer us as teachers, letting us know how students are doing and what challenges are confronting them as they work through the multiple components. We might learn through these informal assessments that the whole class is struggling with a particular component or idea, letting us know it’s time to revise a lesson plan, circle back to reiterate a section, rethink how to reach students who are confused. Or, as is more often the case, some individual students might be struggling with a particular part, and the check lets us hone in on the problem and work one-on-one to get the students over the hump. We believe any project of this depth and breadth almost requires this kind of ongoing check-in in order to take the pulse of both individual students and the class as a whole and drive the kind and pace of instruction. (Another hint: For those students who just can’t seem to make headway in their projects, Sarah sometimes announces at the beginning of a workshop day that a check that will occur at the end of that period; she finds this quick deadline ensures a productive workshop.)

This formative assessment is consistently integrated into the daily class structure of this assignment and is an invaluable means for us to see where our students are in the process. The second prong of our assessment, though, is summative in nature: a way of letting the students know at the end of the project just how well they’ve done. This summative assessment is based on the entire research binder the students produce over the course of the project, a binder that includes their final draft of original writing in the studied genre, their reflective letter about the project, their how-to book, the drafts in progress, their annotated bibliography, and their research journal. Early on in the project, Sarah gives the students the broad rubric she uses (shown in Figure 4.16),
### UNFAMILIAR GENRE PROJECT RUBRIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author's Checklist</th>
<th>A 9–10 points</th>
<th>B 8 points</th>
<th>C 7 points</th>
<th>D 6 points</th>
<th>E 0–5 points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective letter (discusses your reading, writing, metacognition, and research)</td>
<td>insightful</td>
<td>perceptive</td>
<td>observant</td>
<td>somewhat reflective</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final piece looks and reads like stated genre</td>
<td>excellent</td>
<td>good job</td>
<td>average</td>
<td>little effort</td>
<td>doesn’t look or read like genre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final piece is readable, interesting, engaging, and enjoyable</td>
<td>excellent</td>
<td>good job</td>
<td>average</td>
<td>little effort</td>
<td>poorly written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research journal is thorough (Write an entry each time you work on the project.)</td>
<td>12 or more</td>
<td>9–11 entries</td>
<td>6–8 entries</td>
<td>3–5 entries</td>
<td>0–2 entries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research journal explains your research process, metacognition, and experience</td>
<td>insightful</td>
<td>perceptive</td>
<td>process addressed</td>
<td>somewhat addressed</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All drafts and experiments</td>
<td>plentiful</td>
<td>ample</td>
<td>sufficient</td>
<td>few</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference notes (from parents, peers, and teacher; label each on own draft)</td>
<td>plentiful</td>
<td>ample</td>
<td>sufficient</td>
<td>few</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection of five to ten published samples in MLA style</td>
<td>good choices</td>
<td>representative</td>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>poor choices</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annotation for each sample</td>
<td>insightful</td>
<td>perceptive</td>
<td>observant</td>
<td>somewhat reflective</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proofreading (final piece, reflective letter, annotated bibliography)</td>
<td>very few errors</td>
<td>some errors</td>
<td>same errors throughout</td>
<td>many errors</td>
<td>excessive errors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
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**Figure 4.16. Parent Letter to a Student Who Studied Short Stories**
explaining to students that each of the ten categories will be worth 10 percent
of the rubric grade.

The rubric begins with consideration of the students’ reflective letter,
which asks them to evaluate their progress and learning through the unit. The
next two categories credit students for their final draft of the genre they have
chosen, focusing both on how much their version fits the genre and how suc-
cessful it is as an actual piece of writing that would be “interesting, engaging,
and enjoyable” to a reader. Another 20 percent goes to the research journal: for
regularly and consistently writing their entries and for demonstrating thought-
ful metacognition in the entries. The rubric also honors the students’ progress,
as Sarah looks at their experiments, drafts, and conference notes. The anno-
tated bibliography, a huge part of the project, is weighted heavily with another
20 percent: both the inclusion of sufficient samples and thoughtful annotations
of the samples. Finally, Sarah emphasizes the importance of presentation in this
large project with the last category of proofreading. Specifically, she expects the
final drafts of their genre, reflection, and annotated bibliography to be polished
and proofread.

This clearly defined and easy-to-use rubric provides students, parents, and
even counselors with a fairly clear picture of how the students have done on the
project; all these groups can easily look over the circles to see where the students
excelled and where they came up short. However, we recognize that rubrics
alone can go only so far in representing any student’s growth and learning for
any particular project (see, for example, Maja Wilson’s Rethinking Rubrics in
Writing Assessment [2006]). Rubrics, no matter how well designed and thought-
ful, measure only the teacher’s preconceived categories, failing to note the indi-
vidual growth and often nuanced learning that students gain. Rubrics, in other
words, reflect certain qualities, but not everything.

Both of us have struggled with the place of rubrics in our teaching, recog-
nizing their value, but feeling they are not quite enough. Over the past few
years, Sarah’s rubric has changed in various ways as she’s worked to make it rep-
resent more accurately her objectives in the UGP and the qualities of the work
the students produce. More recently, though, she’s moved to a two-tiered ap-
proach to final assessment for this project: 50 percent based on the rubric and
50 percent based on the growth and progress students have shown as readers
and writers. This second part of the assessment is reflected in an individual let-
ter Sarah composes for each student based on her overall reading of the binder
and her notes on the student’s participation and performance in the project.
(See Figure 4.17 for a sample letter.)

These letters, Sarah admits, do take a lot of time. But, as she explains, stu-
dents need, want, and deserve much more response than mere circles on a
chart, especially after the work they’ve put in on this project. In these letters,
Taylor,

Your hard work on this project certainly does show throughout. In fact, you are one of the most passionate, hardworking “productive procrastinators” I know! I love that you really do research and follow your nose into the topics (and ideas) that interest you. This is really valuable: you know how to—and enjoy—research.

And you are self-aware. You practically write your whole piece in your mind, start over, edit, rewrite, edit again—still in your mind—and then finally put pen to paper, all the while feeling like you aren’t doing what you’re supposed to. The truth: We don’t all follow the same, prescribed process. We aren’t assembly lines, and neither is research. Further, we don’t all work “efficiently.” That isn’t to say that it’s OK to put off work, but it is OK to have your own process, so long as it actually works for you. Another truth: my process isn’t all that different from yours.

Here’s what I’ve learned about writing this way: we have to learn to accept the way we are and work with it, which, for writing, means that we need to give ourselves plenty of time to think about the project within the deadlines set for us. The key here is to not procrastinate starting, because I know I can safely say that we both know the value of conferences and the “tiny” revisions that take our writing from good to really good. One more truth: like you, I’m still working on this and I imagine I always will. The key, I think, is to be self-aware, and you’ve come a long way in this.

So, I’m proud of you for finishing this large project on time despite this fluid, time-consuming process. I’ve seen you learning how to come in on deadline this year. Hurray!

And of course I love your children’s story! Every child I’ve known has experienced feeling afraid at bedtime. I think it’s clever how you combined the big brother’s antics with the child’s perception of the monster—I’ve seen my own kids combine reality with their imaginations.

Bravo, Taylor! You’ve written and illustrated a beautiful, compelling picture book. What an accomplishment. Will you write another? Will you consider publishing this book; perhaps you might laminate it and give it to a young friend or donate it to the library?

Yours in following our noses,

Ms. Andrew

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Figure 4.17. Sample Teacher Response Letter
Sarah has a chance to note each student’s growth, celebrate accomplishments, and make suggestions for future growth.

**Lessons Learned**

In this chapter, we’ve tried to give you some very hands-on suggestions for incorporating the Unfamiliar Genre Project at the high school level, based on work with a number of classes over a number of years. The next chapter offers you a sample UGP from one student, something you can use as a model for the students in your class (to give them a sense of what a completed one might encompass) or just to help you envision what the finished product might be. And in Chapter 6, we share some variations we’ve put into practice in a journalism class, in a literature class, and in a methods class at the college level.

What have we learned from our work with the UGP, using it regularly in our classes for five years? Most obvious to us is the potential it offers students: the breadth and depth of the work they voluntarily undertake in this project is stunning. Students choose genres as varied as microfiction, scrapbook, sonnet, political pamphlet, and novel. And it doesn’t end there. Students report that within the short weeks of the project, they are amazed by the dramatic changes they see in their learning. Leo, who studied cookbooks, said,

“This project helped me a lot more than I expected it to. I thought this was just going to be like any other project, but it was different from most of the ones that I have done before. . . . The project has opened my eyes to new forms of writing and has shown me how the format and aspects of writing make the piece. . . . As a reader, I will now pay more attention to different formats and styles of writing so I can incorporate them into my own. . . . I found myself just today reading my dad’s newspaper and paying attention to the special way it was written.

What’s more, students internalize their newfound skills and feel empowered to put them to work. Susan, who investigated instruction manuals, explained,

My writing benefited from having to pay such close attention to detail. . . . This was a change for me because I am used to writing where detail and specifics are not so important. It helped me develop some discipline. . . . I will never read a book or any other piece of written material quite the same again. This project taught me to look for the specific qualities that make each genre unique. I now read as if I am on a treasure hunt, and I am searching for clues. . . . I have a brand new perspective on reading, one that I probably would not have learned without having done this project.
Holly wrote,

When we were first told about this project, I immediately thought, ‘PHOTO-JOURNALISM!’ I figured that it would be an interesting genre for me to study because I love seeing the news through pictures, and I like to take pictures myself. And, yes, I will admit, I also thought it would be an easy genre to study. I figured by taking a few pictures I would be excused from the researching and revising that writing an actual article requires. Sadly, I was wrong. Photojournalism turned out to be much more complicated than I expected. . . . Although I did get frustrated every now and then, I learned a lot from this project. I think the biggest lesson I learned was that to do something well, time and hard work must be applied, no matter how easy the task may seem.

Much as we love these student endorsements, we’d be remiss if we didn’t talk at least briefly about the frustration Holly (and many other students over the years) mentioned. This project is hard: hard for students and hard for teachers, and there is often a point partway through the project when all of us wonder if the end result will be worth it. Our advice to you as a teacher trying this for the first time is this: Hang in there with it! Recognize, acknowledge, affirm your students’ fears and frustrations. This is a real part of writers’ processes. If teachers can see their way to validating these frustrations, it helps the students stay on track; help them look at the big picture, and—most of all—try to have fun. We think the end results are worth it.

The students, actually, have convinced us that this project is a worthwhile and welcome addition to their ways of learning. They learn some traditional research skills—how to use the library, how to use the Internet, and how to critically assess and annotate their findings—and have the added benefit of applying those skills in an immediate and tangible fashion. The long-range benefits are important as well: as students learn more about the concept of genre, they are more informed readers and writers, understanding in a real way that various genres have various demands and using that awareness to approach the new as well as the familiar genres they encounter. Further, researching their genre helps students gain confidence that they can take on new writing tasks—a tangible end to the sometimes elusive research unit. And, if you’re thinking that perhaps this project is most useful with successful writers, we’ve found that even the least confident writers grow in very tangible ways over the course of the project. Will their final projects be as full and presented as beautifully as some of their more confident peers? Not in all cases, but what many have produced has really taken our breath away.

Julia, whose final UGP you’ll read in the next chapter, is an interesting example of this: she began the class without much confidence in her ability as a
writer, but created one of the strongest UGPs in her class. From the first, she was intriguing: black nail polish, bobbed hair, strong sense of personal style. She walked into the classroom on that first day directly to the seat of her choice—in the farthest back corner of the room. Her presence was loud, but her voice quiet, both because she didn’t speak up often in class and because she didn’t project. Yet what most distinguished Julia was the quality of her work. She quickly set herself apart as a talented artist, drawing with perspective and detail unmatched by most of her peers. Her writing assignments demonstrated the same kind of detail and thoughtfulness. At the end of the first-quarter conference, Sarah told her how impressed she was with her work and wondered if she was planning to study writing in college. Julia was shocked by the suggestion. Her? A writer? She’d never seen herself that way.

We surely did. And after you have the chance to read Julia's music review, reflection on her learning, and the component parts that led to these writings in Chapter 5, we think you will, too.