

Write Five: A Structure for Analyzing Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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What is *Write Five*?

At the end of any novel study, students are often confronted with writing something--a narrative, an analysis, or an argument--and panic often sends them to *CliffNotes* or other online crutches to complete this work. To prevent this, I employ a structure called *Write Five* in which students generate the bulk of the writing throughout their study of a novel, leaving them with more writing (and inspiration!) than they need to build a cohesive piece for that unit's final writing. I find that when students have many opportunities for low-stakes writing, and then have many ideas to work with, they find writing a piece for evaluation much less daunting.

To design a *Write Five* unit, follow these steps:

1. Determine what lens with which students will read a novel (a topic of inquiry, an essential question, or a task), and what students will produce at the end of that novel study (a narrative, an analysis, or an argument). Note: Sometimes the lens for reading calls for leaving the text type of the writing open and driven by student interest.
2. Divide the reading into five parts given the structure of the novel under study and the lens through which students are reading the novel. Note: This structure can work just as well in three, four, or six parts if the novel under study demands it.
3. Create a schedule for students to read the text, including the lens for reading, what students will produce at the end of the novel study, and the reading deadlines (the number of chapters and the date by which those chapters need to be read). Publish that information on a bookmark, on the whiteboard, or in your digital classroom. The amount of time you allow between each reading deadline is dependent on the difficulty of the text, the amount of class time devoted to reading, and your own students' needs.
4. On the day of each reading deadline, students will write in response to their reading. Determine the focus of the writing on each reading deadline date so that, when students write to your assigned focus, they are creating material for their final writing. However, make sure that the focus you assign is open-ended enough for students to explore what is of interest to them. These writings are done in class, and students shouldn't concern themselves about the relevance of what they write to the final writing. (For example, students might feel that what they write for reading deadline #2 should directly connect to what they wrote for reading deadline #1, and they shouldn't worry about it--it limits the possibilities of what their final writing could become when they do this.) Allow about 25 minutes in class for each writing.
5. At the end of 25 minutes of writing, students share that writing with a partner (either by reading it out loud in its entirety, reading an excerpt out loud, or talking through it), and each student should make a note of how the piece was received or comments that their partner shared as feedback (which could inform the future writing). None of these writing

pieces need to be evaluated by you. Feel free, however, to circulate as students share with each other, or collect them for a fast read-through (no marking them up!) to see what the students are producing. Ask students to number each piece (1-5) and store them together in their notebooks for easy retrieval later. Of course, these writings become drafts or potential parts of a final writing.

6. Allow the writings and pair-sharing to drive a larger class discussion of the assigned chapters as time allows.
7. At the end of the novel study, ask students to pull these writings back out and reread them. For each writing, they will write a word or phrase on a post-it that captures the essence of, or captures their favorite idea from, that piece of writing. This is the first step in revisiting their during-novel work to find an angle for their final writing.
8. Allow students to arrange their five post-its on their desks in the order that they were written. Then, ask them to find connections or distinctions among the ideas on the five post-its--it is not necessary for them to connect all five, in fact it is crucial that they be given the freedom to run with one, two, or whatever combination of ideas that they discover. The ideas are on post-its so students can move them around, pair two up, or move some ideas away. To guide this work, tell them to ask themselves the following questions:
 - What do I have?
 - What point (theme, thesis, or claim depending on the text type) can I make about my subject?
 - Which writings connect? Which ones are distinct from each other?
 - When I juxtapose two, what new thinking emerges?
 - What writings can I drop?
 - In what order will my selected pieces go?
 - How will I ensure cohesion in the piece?

Be sure to allow students a couple of rounds finding connections, and sharing the possibilities with a partner or small group before committing to an angle for writing. It's important that they have the opportunity to push past their initial idea.

9. Once students have committed to an angle for their final writing, they can highlight the pieces from any of their five writings that will end up in the final piece, and perhaps number those chunks as they think about how to order them. And then they can do further research or rereading (if necessary) to create a draft to share with classmates, get feedback from you, or submit for evaluation.

The *Write Five* structure would work well with the study of any Steinbeck work, but see below for applying the structure to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* using three different lenses. Please note that the page numbers listed in the following units are from the Penguin Classics edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 2006.

Lens

An Inquiry into The Refugee Experience

Note: At the start of this novel study, students need to define, as a class, what a refugee is. At each reading deadline, students choose one moment or one scene from the assigned chapters to analyze, respond to, or connect to their own reading or experience: What do the migrants (refugees, through this lens) experience at each leg of their journey?

Chapters 1-10	Flight from a Lost Home
Chapters 11-19	On the Road
Chapters 20-21	Flight from Hooverville
Chapters 22-26 (to the bottom of 359)	Respite in a Government Camp
Chapters 26 (from the bottom of 359)-30	Flight from Violence Flight from a Flood

Final Writing

The final writing is inspired by their five writings about refugee experiences, so students could write on a wide variety of topics in any text-type: a narrative of their own refugee experience, an analysis of the inhumane treatment of refugees, or a proposal on changes needed in any community's refugee policies--just to name a few possibilities. It's important to conference with students about what they've written, to push their thinking about the possibilities for expanding their in-class drafts to a complete end-of-unit writing.

Lens

Who or what has power over our lives?

Note: For each reading deadline, students answer the unit's essential question using the focus assigned to those chapters and drawing evidence from the novel to support their answer. For example, for chapters 1-10, students can answer this question: How can nature have power over our lives? Or this one: How do landowners have power over their tenants? Should they have this power?

Chapters 1-10	Nature or Landowner
Chapters 11-19	Family
Chapters 20-21	Community
Chapters 22-26 (to the bottom of 359)	Government
Chapters 26 (from the bottom of 359)-30	Individual

Final Writing

An analysis that answers the essential question, synthesizing the thinking in at least two of the writings throughout the unit. Note that the focus of the in-class writings include power sources that can have both positive and negative effects on a person's life, allowing students to negotiate, in their final writing, the complexity of powerful forces in our lives.

Lens

Ma: A Character Analysis

Note: In this version, I have organized the reading by key scene rather than by chapter. Students can read chapters and then reread these key scenes, or can focus only on the key scenes.

Key Scene

Sorting through possessions
(bottom-107 to bottom-108)

Key Scene

Harassed by police
(bottom-213 to mid-214)

Key Scene

Keeping Grandma's death to herself
(top-225 to top-229)

Key Scene

Preparing for the Ladies' Committee visit
(bottom-301 to top-308)

Key Scene

Insisting that the family needs to move
(350 to top-355)

Key Scene

Standing up to the storekeeper
(bottom-373 to bottom-376)

Key Scene

Keeping the family together; Convincing Rose of Sharon to help the dying man
(mid-450 to 455)

After studying and discussing each key scene, students can write to their impressions of Ma, supporting their impressions with textual evidence from the studied key scenes. This focus on Ma encourages students to generate character descriptions: Is she brave? strong? vulnerable? selfless? proud? innovative? powerful? pioneering? traditional? non-traditional? resilient? proud? caring?

I know--there are seven key scenes here; however, students will write five times. I have paired scenes in two places so students can compare Ma's behavior in two scenes before writing their impressions of her. For example, in the second row, I have paired Ma's vocal reaction to police harassment with her silence about Grandma's death--is there strength in both scenes? How do these acts of strength differ? Similarly, how do the key scenes in row three work together? How does Ma's behavior differ when she is dealing with outsiders or with her own family? Of course, you can pair any of these key scenes together (e.g. the police scene and the storekeeper scene have obvious parallels), but I chose to present the scenes in chronological order.

This approach is particularly powerful for ELL students since it provides access to a classic text for students still on their journey to fluency in English. This approach allows ELLs to focus on one character only, and through studying key scenes, come to their own conclusions about who that character is, and why that character matters.

Product

Students will write a character analysis of Ma, pulling evidence from at least two of the writings they produced during the study of the novel. This analysis should include a conclusion about the significance of Ma's character, about what her character illustrates about mothers, women, migrants, or survivors, either during the Depression or in the world today.

Annotated Bibliography:
Sources of Inspiration for the *Write Five* Structure

Blau, Sheridan. "Academic Writing in a Knowledge Building Community: A Commentary Workshop Beyond and Better than Argument, Grades 6-12." Annual Conference for Teachers Grades K-12: Helping Students Read and Write about Complex Literary and Nonfiction Texts in the Era of Common Core. UCI Writing Project. 11 Dec 2014, School of Education, University of California, Irvine, Session Two.

Blau's notion of students writing commentaries about puzzling passages in reading has become my way of assessing reading and of structuring some novel studies--at each reading deadline, my students write a commentary (sometimes open-ended; other times, with a particular focus) and those commentaries drive the discussion of the novel. The five writings of *Write Five* are similar in that they are low-stakes and open to student interpretation--there is no one right answer--but they sometimes ask students to write in other genres than commentary, depending on the novel study focus. In *Write Five*, I have added returning to these "commentaries" (or whatever type of writing they are) to extract pieces for a more developed piece of writing to be evaluated as an end-of-the-unit assessment.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Elbow shares a direct writing process helpful for writing to a deadline, in which he advocates for taking any writing assignment and giving equal time to writing and then revising. The writing time consists of fast writing about the topic or available sources, and the revision time consists of labeling and marking important parts of that writing, cutting out some parts of it, and then ordering and organizing what remains. My version of this is asking students to capture what they've written on post-its, arranging them, and then highlighting sections of the original writing that will be used in the final piece.

Skloot, Rebecca. "Index Cards for Story Structure." *YouTube*, uploaded by Educurious Partners, 21 May, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6lhQ7wBESw&t=8s>.

While doing research for her book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot gathered key events on index cards, storing them in chronological order in two index-card holders. Then, she culled the essential from the large stack of cards, arranging what was left in an order that became the outline of her book. Instead of index cards, I am using post-its, but the idea is that each piece of writing is captured on a small, movable piece of paper so students can easily see what they have and arrange the ideas that work together to create a cohesive piece.