

You, A Creative Reader

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“You, A Creative Reader.” If you infer from the three elements in the title that I plan to emphasize both you and creativity in connection with reading, you probably will guess that (a) I’ll try to involve you personally in some way of thinking about the complex business of reading; and (b) I’ll stress originality of thinking as opposed to accuracy, analysis, and evaluation. Also, I should add that I am considering reading in its broadest sense so that the term includes prereading experiences and visual literacy.

When I began my teaching career many years ago, I recall very well the battle that was being waged publicly over why Johnny couldn’t read. At that time the sides were designated as the “look-say” approach and the “phonics” approach. Matters are more complicated in the reading field these days, and I doubt if it would be accurate to say the battle lines are drawn up with just one group of advocates on either side. Nevertheless, the problems of teaching reading are still the most serious in the instructional program of any elementary teacher. In all likelihood they will remain so in our time and also in our great grandchildren’s time.

Consider, for example, the problems of Mr. Mellowing, a hypothetical person based on real people. Of the three seventh-grade teachers in his junior high school who taught literature, Mr. Mellowing was considered the most erratic and disorganized. He was always trying out new ideas—invariably his own ideas—and sometimes they were flops. On the other hand, none of the other seventh-grade teachers in the school were so successful in exciting students.

Youngsters in Mr. Mellowing’s classes frequently were enthusiastic about subjects that seemed to have little to do with English literature. His students were concerned not only with studying the stories, poems, and essays of literary greats of the past; they were greatly interested in all kinds of writing, including their own. Sometimes, as a result of browsing in the wide selection of books, magazines, and newspapers available in Mr. Mellowing’s class, a student became interested in a subject which was considered not only beyond the scope of the course, but also as improper subject matter for a seventh grader. (Among these subjects investigated were the role of the United States in maintaining dictatorships in the Caribbean and in Latin America, misconduct in the Senate, illegitimacy among teenagers, and exploitation of American Indians.) The criticisms by others, however, had little apparent effect upon Mr. Mellowing’s teaching practices. He continued to encourage students to read broadly and to try to understand the problems and issues they found in their reading.

Among the assignments and projects contrived by Mr. Mellowing during the two years he managed to remain in the junior high school were these:

Shorter Assignments in Fiction

Reread a story from the point of view of the author; then retitle it.

Read a myth or fable; then rewrite it, giving it a modern setting.

Reread the story imagining that you are one of the characters reviewing the action on his death bed. Write down what you might say to someone by your side.

Write a few paragraphs about the merits and demerits of the story from the point of view of your parent.

Poetry

Reread a poem, imagining that you are a composer of music and that you will write a musical score to accompany a reading of the poem.

Describe the kinds of music you would want as background for the various parts of the poem.

Read another poem by the same author and compare the two poems with regard to vocabulary and rhyme scheme. Report your observations and comment upon the author's diction and rhyming.

Reread the poem; then write a parody of it.

Biography

Reread a biography, looking for critical events in the life of the subject. Explain why they were critical.

Read a biography about somebody from the past; then compare the subject to a modern-day figure, noting marked similarities and differences.

Essays

If an appropriate essay can be found in an inexpensive paperback edition, "read with a pencil." Carry on a conversation or a debate with the author by writing on the printed pages (making notes in the margins, challenging the author with questions and statements at the top and bottom of the page).

Miscellaneous

Read a story; then dramatize a scene which is well liked or important.

Revise the ending of the story and present the new version in written or dramatic form.

Sketch or paint individuals or scenes from the story.

Construct a model of a structure or of a city featured in the story.

Make a clay model of one or more of the characters in the story (or of an animal in the story).

Draw a map of the area in which the action of the story takes place. Use commercial maps to help you if the story is laid in a real-life place; use your imagination as well as commercial maps to help you if the locale is fictional.

Create a comic strip which is based on the characters or situations in the story.

Design a poster or newspaper advertisement which (1) fits in with the story's plot or (2) might persuade someone to read the story.

Write a jingle or song which is based on the characters of the story.

Put on a puppet show which features characters from the story or characters that are similar.

Make a mural depicting scenes from the story.

Guess what the author might be like, solely by how he wrote the story. Then read about the author and see how close you came in your guessing.

What do you think of the kinds of assignments Mr. Mellowing gave his students? How effectively does he foster creative thinking?

We often talk about the first step of the creative process as having to do with a feeling of discomfort. Unless I am badly mistaken, this is a chronic condition of teachers, especially with regard to reading problems. One way you might get a different perspective of your problems in helping young people acquire and develop reading skills is to think of yourself as a magical person. We won't imagine that the world is magic or wonderful—it will be just the same kind of world as you know it to be now. But imagine yourself to have magical powers. What would you change in order that all of your students become more efficient, insightful, and creative in their reading? Why don't you give some thought to being a wonderful, omnipotent reading teacher now?