

Writing About Literature: Producing a Polished Piece

As teachers frame their writing assignments, it is helpful—as with all writing—to consider purpose and audience. In the classroom, student essays based on literature typically serve as tools for evaluation, enabling instructors to judge how much and how well students understand a text. However, research suggests that when the only audience for student work is the teacher in the role of evaluator, students are likely to produce superficial, "safe" texts rather than using their writing to grapple with genuine issues in an effort to further develop their literary envisionment.

If we rethink such assignments, putting them in the context of real-world writing about literature (a book review, perhaps, or a letter to a friend about a shared reading experience), we can see how such essays might be thought of as continuing a conversation among peers, a conversation that has been ongoing since the class first opened the text. That is, the final piece of writing might offer students the opportunity to pose some final pertinent comments and observations to enrich their classmates' understandings of the text even further. When students view their writing in this light, their work assumes a greater importance to them, and, in turn, reflects their increased commitment to it.

In addition to keeping this notion of essay-as-conversational-turn in mind, it is useful to remember that in order to write effectively about a literary text, any writer has to have a good understanding of the text (have content—things to say) and has to have a range of writing strategies to access and organize content, presenting ideas in a clear and interesting manner.

Scaffolding activities such as the ones presented in this clip and its support materials help students develop things to say by developing their envisionments of the literature. Other activities can help them present their ideas in clear and interesting prose by teaching them tools for invention, organization, revision, and editing.

Above all, producing a polished piece of writing requires time. Many teachers find it worthwhile to assign fewer pieces that encourage rich development, instead of many pieces, hastily completed.