

Exploring Nonfiction in High School

With the *1999 English Language Arts Standard Course of Study*, students will study and create literature that encompasses all genres, including nonfiction. According to both state and national standards, students need to read for a wide range of purposes, including "to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment." (Standards for the English Language Arts, IRA and NCTE, 1996) This expansion of literary study beyond the traditional genres of fiction, poetry and drama will involve time and resources as teachers research and explore the use of nonfiction in their classrooms.

Despite the traditional focus on fiction, students will spend most of their post-secondary lives encountering nonfiction: newspapers, magazines, manuals, contracts, email, letters, advertisements, web pages, etc. The proliferation of television news programs, talk shows, and even cable channels dedicated to news, weather, and how-to shows points to the increased appetite for information.

Furthermore, in a recent survey conducted by ACT, secondary teachers and college professors were asked to rate the importance of reading content and skills. While both middle and high school English teachers rated prose fiction at the most important, college professors of literature and history rated both social sciences and humanities content as more important than prose fiction. (For more information about this study, see www.act.org/news/releases/2000/04-12-00.html). These contradictions illustrate the philosophical shift that the new *Standard Course of Study* attempts to address.

Clearly, for both post-secondary education and for lives as thoughtful, productive citizens, students need to develop appreciation and skills for reading and writing nonfiction. Nonfiction includes informational books and articles, biographies, books of true experience, newspapers, news magazines, historical documents and speeches, essays, journals, letters, and personal accounts. (For further discussion of these types, see Appendix D of the *1999 SCS*.) As we move through the information age, students need experience with all forms of nonfiction across all strands of the English Language Arts curriculum – oral language, written language, and other media/technology.

For example, students in a typical high school English class may:

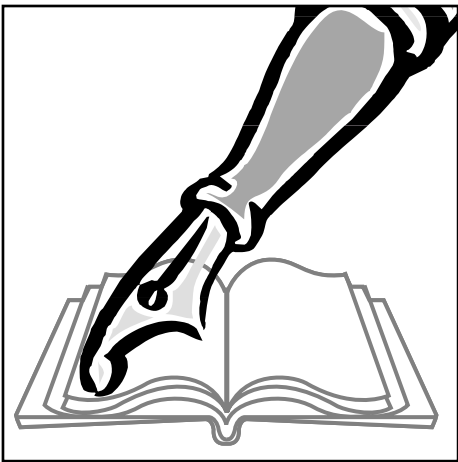
- listen to recordings of speeches
- analyze commercials and informational brochures
- watch documentaries
- research on-line and print resources
- study models of professional essays, news articles and editorials
- read biographical accounts and historical documents

Typical student products might include:

- delivering a speech
- creating an informational brochure
- analyzing an advertisement
- directing a commercial
- performing a monologue based on a memoir
- authoring a web page
- drawing an editorial cartoon
- composing a business letter
- writing a research paper
- presenting information with an annotated bibliography

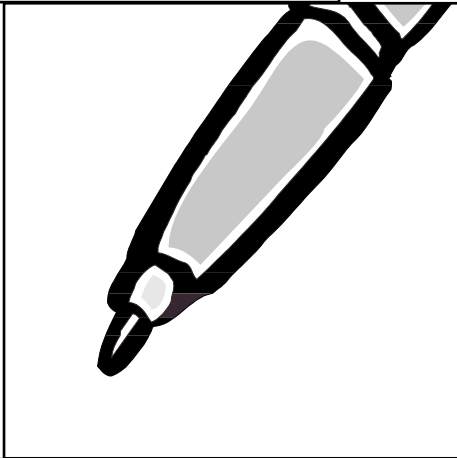


Spotlight on Teacher Practices



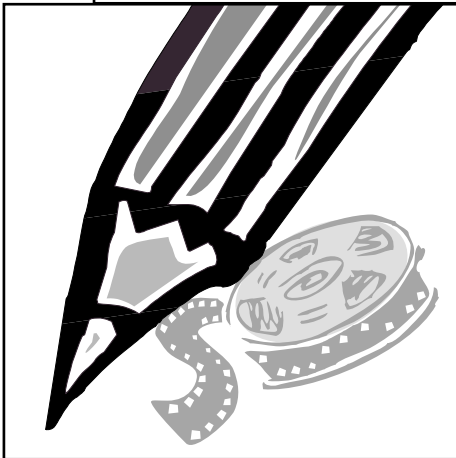
Richard Uzzell, of Pender High School, suggests having student groups learn new software programs or hardware equipment (such as scanners or digital cameras) by using manuals, exploring on-line resources for the programs, and completing authentic tasks. Then each group could instruct other students in the class in the use of the software, creating tip sheets and serving as "experts" for the class in future projects.

	STRANDS					GOALS			
FOCUS	O	W	OMT	EXP	INFO	ARG	CRIT	LIT	G/L
ANCILLARY	O	W	OMT	EXP	INFO	ARG	CRIT	LIT	G/L



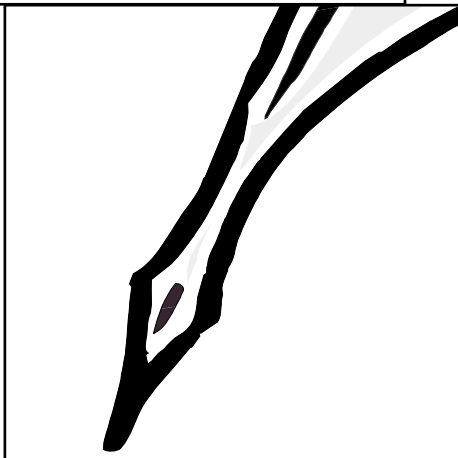
Michelle Roberts, of Greene Central High School, uses authentic letters from different time periods with her students. For example, with a Civil War letter written by a Union soldier, students might take on the personas of slaves, Confederate soldiers, white abolitionist leaders, women waiting at home, etc. Each student has to provide a written response to the letter from the viewpoint of the assigned persona, showing understanding of point of view, bias, context, voice, and respect for the opinions of others.

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ANCILLARY	O	W	OMT	EXP	INFO	ARG	CRIT	LIT	G/L



Another activity that Roberts recommends is to have students analyze and compare three different letters relating to the same situation. Students look at the contrasting views of various groups and also at the historical clues buried in the letters. For instance, poor spelling in a letter written by a black woman from Birmingham in 1932 illustrates well the limited literacy of blacks at that time. This activity can also generate discussion and interest in a particular issue and works well in conjunction with a work of fiction (such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*).

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ANCILLARY	O	W	OMT	EXP	INFO	ARG	CRIT	LIT	G/L



As preparation for a research project, Anne Harkins, of Charles B. Aycock High School, has students critique and compare websites about the same subject (such as Shakespeare's life). After identifying three websites that offer varying amounts of information, she has students evaluate each one for usefulness, appeal and accuracy. Then each student writes a paragraph about the most helpful web site. After each student has compared the sites, the class discusses their understanding of valid resources and the need to use information from the Internet wisely.

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