I teach a senior-level elective, Advanced Expository Writing, in which we use the text *Patterns for College Writing* by Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell. In the introduction, “Reading to Write,” they emphasize the importance of reading model essays as a preparation for class discussions, evaluating the ideas of others, forming personal judgments, and developing original points of view. In essence, they say, reading facilitates critical response. They also suggest that the reader actively participates in interpreting the written word based on his or her life experiences, age, ethnic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. In addition, it is the reader’s responsibility to formulate interpretations that can be substantiated by the text. These premises can easily be extended to the use of film to enhance writing on every ability level.

Referring to the *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts*, it is clearly stressed that “students need to construct meaning through different media, analyze their transactions with the media texts, and create their own media texts and performances. Teachers must help students to explore contemporary media as extensions of literature and as entities in and of themselves” (NCTE 1996, 27). The following units demonstrate how I have incorporated these NCTE guidelines into the teaching of expository writing.

Advanced Expository Writing is a course designed to help students improve their writing skills through composing in a variety of rhetorical modes, including description, narration, exemplification, comparison/contrast, definition, and argumentation. *Patterns for College Writing* provides an excellent variety of model essays by such celebrated writers as Sandra Cisneros, Maya Angelou, Joan Didion, Jonathan Kozol, Richard Rodriguez, and Bruno Bettelheim. Their essays are stimulating, provocative, and diverse. However, my students are rarely ignited by what they read, so, as a supplement to these model essays, I use films as texts. This allows students to construct meaning through different media (NCTE Guideline No. 1).
Narration Unit

One of the most accessible modes of writing is narration. To launch the unit, I ask my students to “tell me a story” as a freewriting activity. Topics range from getting a driver’s license, visiting a college campus, scoring the winning basket, cutting a class, and attending a rock concert. After sharing these stories out loud, we can discuss several ingredients of narration. Were the events presented in an engaging manner? Did the writer use chronological order, flashback, or begin in medias res (in the middle of a sequence of events)? Were enough details presented to help the audience experience the events? At this point, we turn to our textbooks and read several professional models, including “Finishing School,” by Maya Angelou, in which she describes the humiliating experience of working for a white woman; “My Mother Never Worked,” by Donna Smith-Yackel, which satirically questions society’s definition of “women’s work”; and Martin Gansberg’s “Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn’t Call the Police,” which relates the events leading up to the brutal murder of Kitty Genovese. Reading these essays encouraged my students to listen to other people’s stories, to formulate personal reactions to the issues raised, and to develop critical responses to the quality of the writing. However, throughout the class discussions, I could sense that they were not engaged in the writing and were just going through the motions to answer my questions. Turning from the print text to film radically changed the atmosphere of the classroom.

“A quilting bee provides the setting for archetypal tales.” This statement accompanied the cast list of the film, How to Make an American Quilt, directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse and based on the novel of the same title by Whitney Otto. Since we were sharing people’s stories in our class discussions of narrative essays, I selected a film that pieced together the stories of nine women much like the colorful patches in a quilt. The central metaphor worked beautifully for my purposes.

As with any film I show to the class, I carefully screened this one ahead of time. (This must become part of a teacher’s preparation for any film presentation.) How to Make an American Quilt tells the story of Finn Bennett-Dodd, age twenty-six, who comes to stay with her great-aunt, Glady Joe, and her grandmother, Hy, while she considers her impending marriage and finishes her master’s thesis. She spends time with the eight women who meet weekly for a quilting circle and hears their stories.

I prepared some active viewing questions to encourage my students to focus on the stories of these women’s lives, beginning with Finn. They were instructed to re-create Finn’s story, paying close attention to the details that shaped her life. These details could include bits of speech, descriptions of her environment, and major events in her life. Naturally, being the protagonist, her story continues to evolve as the film continues. One by one, the stories of her great-aunt, Glady Joe, and her grandmother, Hy, as well as the other women in the quilting bee—Sophia, Emma, Constance, Anna, and Marianna—are revealed through flashbacks. Each woman’s story unfolds to reveal her in youth and adulthood. The final story comes from Finn’s mother, who shows up at the end of the film. At this point in time, the quilt has been completed, and each woman has created a special patch symbolizing her life’s story. These include
colorful remnants of a party dress, a black crow, two interconnecting circles, the Eiffel Tower, yellow roses, and a painter’s palette. Collectively, they reflect archetypal stories. Finn must process what she has learned from these women and their stories and apply it to her own life. In quilting, she is reminded, she must choose her “combinations” carefully, because the right choices will enhance her “quilt.” She must remember there are no rules; she must rely on instinct and be brave.

After viewing and discussing the film, I gave my students an assignment to make sure they understood the notion of archetype as an original model or type after which other similar things are patterned. I distributed a list of all the women’s names, and asked them to explain how each woman’s tale was, in fact, an archetype. We shared our responses. I was quite impressed with their ability to understand and apply this term to the film. We concluded that Finn’s story was the fear of commitment; Gladys Joe was the betrayed wife; Hy lived a life of secrets and lies; Sophia suffered from unfulfilled dreams; Emma was the patient wife with the philandering husband; Constance became the “other” woman; Anna dared to experience forbidden love; Marianna suffered from unrequited love; and Sally learns that with age comes wisdom. Despite their varied and painful stories, the theme illustrated by the patches in the quilt is “where love resides,” and is made for Finn’s wedding. By the closing scenes of the film, the viewer feels confident that Finn has grown and matured over the summer, and will be able to make the commitment to her fiancé that she has been avoiding all along. Throughout our extensive discussions of the film, it became clearly evident that my students were analyzing their transactions with the text (NCTE Guideline No. 2).

Extended Writing Activity: The Interview Project

As Katherine Anne Porter once wrote, “I have never known an uninteresting human being and I have never known two alike. There are broad classifications and deep similarities, but I am interested in the thumbprint.” I, too, am interested in the thumbprint. The next step of the process is for students to reflect on their own lives and think about a person they know who has an interesting story to tell. This person would then become the subject of a narrative essay. As we learned through Finn, there are stories all around us.

Among the list of people my students found to interview were a liberated Jew from Mauthausen concentration camp, a victim of a military coup in Brazil, a survivor of the war between India and Pakistan, a woman who was unable to have children, a cousin who abused drugs and alcohol, a substitute teacher who served in the Middle East during WWII, a civilian doctor who served in the Korean War, a minister who attended Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, march on Washington, a grandmother who was a former elementary school teacher, an uncle who worked in the White House during Jimmy Carter’s administration, and a mom who organized a protest in her high school in the ’60s.

Conducting the interviews was the next step. Reviewing the list of people my students decided to interview, I suggested they formulate several open-ended questions, and begin the interview by asking “What do you remember about . . . ?”
So, for example, if the person survived a concentration camp and emigrated to America, some questions might include “What do you remember about coming to America? being an immigrant? overcoming prejudice, language barriers, and cultural differences?” If the person was a fireman who was badly burned, the student might consider asking, “What do you remember about the events leading up to the call? battling the flames? being injured, and being rescued?” I encouraged them to be sensitive to the feelings of the person they were interviewing, to take notes or record the interview, and not to hesitate to ask for clarification or more details. At the conclusion of the interview, I reminded them to thank the person.

After the information was gathered, the students had to decide how to arrange the events of the story. Reinforcing the strategies we had discussed earlier, I suggested their options were linear, flashback, or in medias res. Referring back to the film, we once again discussed how effective flashback is as a narrative device. This was the strategy most of the students elected to use. For example, in his essay about his mother, who organized a protest in her high school, Ted began his introduction with a general description of the ‘60s. “Issues like Vietnam, free speech, and civil rights were hot topics of much disagreement, which led to protests, strikes, and walkouts all over the nation... students in the ‘60s had a need to make their voices heard, and often sent their messages using grass root, peaceful means. There were, though, times when that kind of approach simply would not do.” His thesis clearly indicates the direction his essay will take. “My mother, Lois, witnessed one of these violent demonstrations in her very own high school, and has lived to tell the tale.” The body of the essay sheds light on the circumstances leading up to the demonstration, which include the promise of an assembly to memorialize Martin Luther King, Jr., that which was really intended to be about Archduke Franz Ferdinand II of Austria. “The students’ murmurs of disappointment soon grew into roars of outrage.” Ted continues to describe the eruption of violence, the evacuation of the building, and the cancellation of school to allow for a cooling-off period. His mother was suspended for several days for “inciting disorderly conduct.” He concludes the narrative with a personal reflection about the era and his mother’s behavior. “I’d like to think that in some way she helped to accelerate the cultural awareness of Jersey City, even if in a small way, and that her contribution, along with others, led the path to a more enlightened state, which we take for granted today.” Through interviewing his mother, Ted had the chance to experience another era, to listen to the rebellious exploits of a parent who was once an adolescent, and to leave the experience feeling inspired. The quality of his narrative essay was exemplary.

Another approach using flashback was the story of Mr. Pannullo, a substitute teacher at our high school, who served in the Middle East during WWII. Eugene, the student writer, was going to cut class the day his science teacher was absent, but changed his mind. “Mr. Pannullo decided that this period would not be wasted on small talk, and decided to teach his own lesson.” Using flashback, Eugene re-creates Mr. Pannullo’s dramatic story. “A truck with four Arab soldiers pulled up next to their Jeep. The soldiers got out of the truck and drew their guns on private Pannullo and his sergeant.” It turns out the Arabs were protecting a field of hashish and thought the
Americans were going to expose them. However, the Americans only stopped to go to the bathroom. Eugene concluded his story returning to the present. “The whole class looked at Mr. Pannullo in amazement, shocked that something like this had happened, and he lived to tell about it.” Not cutting class that day was one of the best decisions Eugene has ever made.

A third approach to the assignment involved starting in medias res, which was the choice Andrew made as he re-created the story of his grandfather, Henry, who served as a civilian doctor in the Korean War. Andrew did not want to compose a conventional introduction to tell Henry’s story; rather, he began with action.

“Beads of sweat were dripping down Henry’s face. A pungent odor emanated from the pack of ten who were trying to stay as invisible as they could. Every few steps up the rocky path of the mountain, the captain, leading the excursion to freedom, would wave his hand wildly. ‘Get down, down, down,’ he whispered in a strong muffled tone.” Andrew composed this dramatic opening to establish Henry’s precarious situation in a war zone. Next he flashed back to the circumstances that brought his grandfather to Korea, and then resumed the narrative in a blaze of bullets and explosions. “He could not run; he could not flee. He began to crawl on the ground using his arms and elbows to propel him.” Eventually, Henry finds safety.

I was proud of Andrew for challenging himself to find the most creative way to organize his essay. I believe all my students were committed to telling these stories in the most focused, detailed, and emotionally engaging ways possible. Using a film to launch the unit on narrative writing proved to be very successful. It provided a shared viewing experience for all of us, and generated an array of wonderful stories from the ordinary people who populate our lives.

**Definition Unit**

Building on the success of the narration unit, I decided to use *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, directed by Milos Foreman, to expand my unit on the definition essay. Winner of all the major academy awards in 1975, the film, considered an American classic, depicts life in a mental hospital as a frightening microcosm of society, in which power and authority are often abused.

**Pre-viewing Activity: Questioning the Hero**

It might be helpful to define a few terms as a previewing activity. For example, what is a microcosm? Investigate whether the students have experienced this concept before, for example, when they read *Lord of the Flies* or *A Separate Peace*. How is a high school, a college campus, or an army platoon a microcosm? Another important term to define is hero. Who are historic heroes? contemporary heroes? mythological or legendary heroes? film and literary heroes? Who are the people we admire for their strength, ability, achievement, nobility, and courage? Have the qualities we once attributed to heroes changed? For example, no one would question that Odysseus was an ancient
hero, but do people agree that Hans Solo fits the qualifications today? Do heroes reflect the time and place in which they live, such as Beowulf, or can we modernize the definition to include Chuck Yeager? A new term for many students is antihero, a type of hero who is lacking in traditional qualities such as courage, idealism, and fortitude. The character is frequently a pathetic, comic, or even antisocial figure. He does not possess nobility of life or mind and does not have an attitude marked by high purpose, but often rebels against an oppressive social system. In the character of Randle Patrick McMurphy, students will meet a wisecracking, defiant, rebellious hero, who sacrifices his own life to restore the dignity and manhood of others. Finally, it is important for students to understand the meaning of mental disorders, recently defined in a comprehensive new report by United States Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher as “health conditions marked by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior that cause distress or impair a person's ability to function.” Equipped with these definitions, students are ready to begin viewing.

Questions for Viewing One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Distributing preplanned questions will help guide active student viewing. In addition to following the story line and observing the characters, I want my students to appreciate the film on an aesthetic level. Just as the exposition of a novel or a short story provides essential information, so, too, does the opening scene in the film. When asked to focus on a particular issue, students usually have little trouble responding. The sample responses that follow the guides illustrate how guided viewing questions can help to encourage students to focus on the cinematic qualities of a film.

1. Comment on the information presented visually and aurally in the opening scenes of the film.

   Eerie, Native American music plays as we see a panoramic view of a car driving through the empty wilderness at dawn. The next scene contrasts the calm of the outside world and shows a nurse in a black cape entering a locked hospital ward. The camera pans the sleeping patients. McMurphy arrives at the hospital in handcuffs. The mood is very melancholy.

2. Describe McMurphy upon his arrival at the ward.

   McMurphy is hyper, clownish, bold, and aggressive, and from his exaggerated behavior you can tell he's faking mental illness.

3. What do you notice about the camerawork that helps to establish Nurse Ratched's characterization in the group therapy session?

   Nurse Ratched sits upright and calmly asserts her authority as she begins the session addressing the problems in Mr. Harding's marriage. Her domineering attitude prevails as the men meekly answer her questions. McMurphy sits and observes, but a close-up of his face reveals his amusement at the whole situation. A fight breaks out between Harding and the others. Another
close-up shot reveals a self-satisfied smile on Nurse Ratched's face as the scene ends.

4. How does the camerawork contribute to the humor during the sequence when McMurphy hijacks the bus to take his fellow inmates on a fishing excursion?

The camera pans close-up shots of the men from the ward as McMurphy introduces them to the charter boat manager as doctors and professors. Their facial expressions show how they're playing along with him. For the first time in their lives, they feel proud and famous.

5. During the scene after the party on the ward when Nurse Ratched threatens to inform Billy's mother about his sexual behavior, how does the camerawork enhance the dramatic tension?

Billy is shot close up, and he looks terrified as the nurse speaks to him. He begins to stutter and loses control. Then he is dragged away.

6. Notice the angles used to film the scene when McMurphy strangles Nurse Ratched. Were they good choices?

From a high angle shot, we see McMurphy strangling Nurse Ratched and we cheer! She's struggling beneath his grip. Billy has just killed himself because of her cruel treatment. She got what she deserved.

Throughout the film, we are exposed to a number of medical and psychiatric conditions. The Chief is a “deaf-and-dumb” Indian. Painfully shy Billy Bibbit stutters incessantly. Dale Harding's intellect prevents him from understanding his wife's adultery. Charlie Cheswick suffers from insecurity and low self-esteem, and a number of other faces who inhabit the ward suffer delusions or have been left in a catatonic state. After each day's viewing, everyone has questions about the psychological problems from which these men suffer. I spoke to my colleague who teaches psychology, and he gave me information about these disorders as well as about lobotomies. It became obvious to me that researching these psychiatric disorders and then writing a definition essay would be one effective way to respond to the film.

Responding to the Film Through Writing

What is ideal about the structure of a definition essay is that it draws on so many other patterns of development. For example, if a student decides to define lobotomy, he can also use exemplification to provide examples of people who have had this type of neurosurgery. One student researched Rosemary Kennedy, the sister of John F. Kennedy; Rose Williams, the sister of Tennessee Williams; and Frances Farmer, a Hollywood actress. In defining obsessive compulsive disorder, description can be used as a pattern to describe the behaviors of these sufferers. A student found a case study of Greg. "Everyday, Greg feels an urge to wash himself continuously, as if he feels contaminated by germs. His constant washing has already caused the skin on his hands to peel and
scrape, yet he continues his washing for long durations of time.” Comparison/contrast would be helpful in an essay investigating manic-depression, comparing the extreme highs and suicidal lows of the disorder. From her research, another student describes her aunt’s periods of extreme euphoria, during which she mountain-climbed, skydived, and bungee-jumped, to the times when she could not lift herself out of bed in the morning and felt utter despair. A discussion of stuttering might involve a process pattern to explain how the flow of speech is broken by repetitions or prolongations of sounds and syllables. Additional topics of interest were anxiety disorders (phobias, panic attacks), schizophrenia (paranoid, catatonic), electric shock therapy, narcolepsy, Tourette’s syndrome, and attention deficit disorder. Overall, my students relied on the Internet for researching these disorders. The results were extremely worthwhile.

An effective way to respond to the film in a more conventional manner was to encourage students to compose an original thesis and substantiate it using the film. I suggested a number of topics to reinforce issues we had addressed earlier. Is McMurphy a hero or antihero? How is the ward a microcosm of society? How does the film reflect Emerson’s statement, “for non-conformity, the world whips you with its displeasure”? What are comic elements in the film? Why is this film considered a modern classic? Why did Nicholson, Fletcher, and Foreman win Academy Awards? Finally, I challenged my students to create their own topics and thesis statements. I modeled one of my own: “McMurphy did more for the self-esteem of the men on the ward than pills, group therapy, or electric shock therapy.”

Regina chose to respond to the Emerson quote. In her introduction she stated, “R. P McMurphy was like a huge boulder thrown into the pool, constantly making ripples. From the day of his admittance to the psychiatric ward, he challenged authority, and for that he paid a high price. One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is a parable of how society refuses to tolerate non-conformity.” She substantiated her thesis with three concrete examples from the film, including McMurphy’s insistence upon changing the daily schedule on the ward in order to watch the World Series, his attempt to break out of the hospital, and his final defiance of throwing a party late one night. Despite his thwarted efforts, “he refused to accept defeat . . . the effort to challenge authority was much more important than the actual outcome. For his behavior, he suffered harsher and harsher repercussions.” Regina concluded her discussion, “in the end they worked him until he paid the ultimate price, for they took the only thing Nurse Ratched could never control: his mind.” These insights clearly reflect Regina’s ability to evaluate the ideas embraced by the film.

Clara wrote about McMurphy as an “unconventional hero who constantly stimulated the patients to be independent during such events as the World Series, a fishing trip, and a party, and ignited a spark of hope into their lives so they could once again feel a passion for life.” She also described him as “an outlaw, a hero, and a powerful, unforgettable character.”

The single most original approach to the essay was from Andrew, the same student who took a risk in his interview essay, responding to How to Make an American Quilt assignment by starting in the middle of the action during which his grandfather
struggled to stay alive during the Korean War. Perhaps motivated by the success of that paper, he decided to write an extended metaphor comparing the hospital ward to a military hierarchy, and comparing each character in the film to an assigned order or rank. For example, he identified the military elite as the generals. In the film, he sees the elite in the character of Dr. Spivey, a bureaucrat who is “detached and without a firm grasp of what is truly going on.” Next in line after the general is the lieutenant, who has more direct control over his unit of men and who on occasion reports to the general. The lieutenant in the film is Nurse Ratched, who “carries out all ward operations from running group therapy sessions to distributing medication. She must maintain its organization and function.” The lowest-ranking people in the military are the enlisted men, who have no individual power and must carry out the orders coming from the officers. In the hospital, the enlisted men are the patients. “They shower when they are told to, eat when they are told to, and sleep when they are told to.” Among them, “there are some like Tabor and McMurphy who are drafted . . . and Harding, Cheswick, and Billy who are there voluntarily.” Andrew concluded by stating, “The film is a modern masterpiece that portrays the hospital as a microcosm of the military. Everyone was well aware of where they stood in relation to everyone else, but the rebel, McMurphy, blurred those lines. He was impulsive, rash, and aggressive, while the general and lieutenant wanted their enlisted men to be sedate, rational, and passive. His thrilling personality makes him the quintessential antihero. McMurphy’s struggle with Nurse Ratched is an archetypal conflict: the rebel versus the establishment, the likable underdog versus the mean-spirited authority, the enlisted man versus the officer. Unfortunately, the system defeats our hero, McMurphy, but his dignity is saved by his friend’s courage to end his suffering and commit an act of euthanasia.” Andrew’s response shows high-level critical thinking, an original point of view, and creativity.

Twenty-five years after its release, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest continues to challenge our thinking and inspire our reactions. In an op-ed piece in the New York Times (6 January 1999), Maureen Dowd satirizes Elizabeth Dole’s candidacy for president: “In politics as in romance, you often crave the complete opposite of your last relationship. Bill Clinton is undisciplined, unruly, untoward. His bawdy appetites and reckless indulgences have been sloshing over our lives for what seems like an eternity . . . what sort of president will we want next? a control freak, of course. Someone who is all discipline and no spontaneity. All trust and no lust . . . . After President McMurphy, we will want Nurse Ratched.”

Suggestions for Other Films

On occasion, I have also used The Godfather, another icon of popular culture, with older students, and received many exceptionally well-written essays. Using this film reinforces one of Kirszner and Mandell’s premises, but the application is to the viewer in this case, who actively participates in interpreting a text based on life experiences, age, ethnic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. For example, Italian American culture is richly portrayed in the film and will generate discussions
regarding stereotyping, Catholicism, gender roles, the extended family, respect, and honor. Violence is another pervasive presence in the film, both domestic and outside the family, which fascinates students and stimulates discussion. Finally, cinematic techniques are exceptional in this film. One of my students wrote about Nino Roto’s score, which “set a deceptive mood” throughout the film. Both lighting and color are used effectively to create a foreboding mood as the film progresses. Probably the most outstanding film technique used is editing. Juxtaposing certain scenes together, such as in the baptism scene, creates powerful meaning for the audience, and students should be aware of how editing affects their experience of the film. The Godfather is considered a modern American classic; however, I would advise exercising discretion and only use it with mature students.

With ninth and tenth graders, I often use The Breakfast Club, which is a beloved film among high school students, when I am teaching a unit on characterization. As they watch the film, I ask them to cite specific examples of dialogue, behavior, and interaction with others so they will have material from which to compose character analyses. For example, one student’s thesis treats the theme of teenage pressure at home and in school as demonstrated through the characters of Brian “brain” Johnson, John “criminal” Bender, and Andrew “athlete” Clark. After the Saturday detention, the characters feel relief from pressures and reveal secrets that they have hidden for so long. They now know that there are others out there who have the same problems they do. For most teenagers, the messages in this film provide comfort and reassurance. For a personal writing assignment at the end of the unit, I ask my students to select the one cast member with whom they most identify and explain why. This response helps foster a personal connection to the fictional character on the screen, and allows students to construct their own meaning of the film.

Student-Created Media Texts and Performances

In addition to analyzing and evaluating films, I think it is essential that students create their own media texts and performances (NCTE Guideline No. 3).

In my Advance Expository Writing class, I assign two novels—one in each marking period—to be read outside of class. Because we write eight essays over the course of the semester, this project involves an alternative method to responding to literature by creating a live or videotaped performance. Early in the semester, I provide my class with a list of both traditional and modern classics, ranging from Pride and Prejudice to Slaughterhouse Five, and encourage them to balance their choices between the traditional and the modern. I assign a due date when the reading is to be completed and I distribute a list of “creative responses” to the readings. These are ideas that have worked well over the past few years; however, I am always open to new ideas. Choices include re-creating several scenes from the novel (either live or on video), creating original skits that re-create the novel, creating a talk show or interview,
creating dramatic monologues, keeping a journal role-playing through the eyes of a character, comparing the incidents depicted in the novel to the actual events, and pitching a screen adaptation of the novel to a Hollywood producer.

Often students want to work with their friends who have read different novels. I suggest sitting down with them and, together, looking for similarities. For example, three of my students read novels with young adult protagonists: Ben Meechum from *The Great Santini*, Esther Greenwood from *The Bell Jar*, and Johnny Gunther from *Death Be Not Proud*. As each student shared the essence of her book, we concluded that all three protagonists were experiencing severe emotional problems. Ben was the victim of physical and psychological abuse at the hands of his father; Esther was suffering from depression; Johnny was dying from an inoperable brain tumor. We decided that conducting a group therapy session would allow each character to reveal his or her problems as well as to share other aspects of their lives. A friend from outside of class volunteered to help in the role of the therapist, and one of the girl's mom did the videotaping. The result was an extraordinary twelve-minute video. As the class sat watching these three girls role-playing Ben, Esther, and Johnny, we were astounded at how realistically they embraced the fictional characters. They truly stepped inside the skin of these troubled young people without any self-consciousness whatsoever. Because they were improvising, they naturally reacted to each other. For example, after Johnny spoke lovingly of his relationship with his father, Ben revealed his own very troubled relationship with his abusive father. Esther added that she has never really gotten over the death of her father, and had a less-than-satisfying relationship with her mother. Collectively, they presented just the right amount of information to help the rest of the class understand the novels.

Another group that created an extraordinary video read *The Chosen*, *East of Eden*, and *The Great Santini*. They decided to present their troubled protagonists waiting for a train. The exterior shots were filmed at our local train station, while interior shots were filmed in one of the girl's basements. Each girl had prepared a written monologue for her character, which was delivered in a voice-over by another girl while the character paced back and forth on the platform. This decision to use the voice-over was a technical consideration because they wanted to include music and were concerned that if they had spoken, it would have been difficult to hear them. So, accompanying the entrance of each young "man," a song played to establish his character. For example, Hassidic music performed by Itzhak Perlman was heard when Danny entered; a recording of "Cain and Abel" by Louie Armstrong was heard as Cal entered, and when Ben entered, we heard "Georgia on My Mind," performed by Ray Charles. The music provided both an emotional and dramatic touch. After each character was clearly established, all three appeared on the platform. They engaged in the simple conversation of three strangers waiting for a train, while revealing personal information about themselves, their troubled relationships with their fathers, and their uncertainties about the future. As the train arrived off-screen, we heard Louis Armstrong sing a mournful rendition of "Nobody Knows the Troubles I've Seen." Again, I was astounded by my students' ability to understand the psychological complexities of fictional characters so close to them in age, as well as their ability to create such a profoundly moving, original production.
Other clever ideas included pitching *The Time Machine* as a script to a Hollywood producer, conducting an interview with Billy Pilgrim (*Slaughterhouse Five*) with the student playing the roles of both the interviewer and Billy, re-creating the family crisis of discovering the mother has cancer from *One True Thing*, creating an original documentary called *In Search of Holden Caulfield*, in which a filmmaker goes from location to location speaking to people who have known Holden, and interviewing the murderers from *In Cold Blood* and *Compulsion* in an episode of 20/20 titled “Crimes of the Century.”

Two other suggestions will enhance this unit. First, I ask the students in the audience to become active listeners. After the presentation is over, they must respond in writing to the question, “How does this presentation make the novels come alive for you?” Then we share their responses with the cast, which is very gratifying to them. Second, I make copies of all the videotapes to use as models in the future. Whether the presentations are videotaped or presented live, this unit provides a welcome break to the writing workshops, and provides students with the opportunity to be creative and to have fun in the process. When asked how they felt about this project, the overwhelming response was favorable. One student said, “I feel that this week has really opened my eyes to a number of books that I would have never even thought of reading if it hadn’t been for these presentations.” Truly, this activity brings literature to life for the students as well as for me.

Using film in addition to professional essays to teach expository writing reinforces critical thinking skills and helps students to construct meaning through a variety of media. Film promotes lively discussion, and sensitizes students to the cinematic treatment of the traditional narrative. Producing their own videos empowers them to work collaboratively by composing scripts and becoming actively involved in the creation of an original production.

**Additional Activities**

1. Encourage students to read Whitney Otto’s 1991 novel, *How to Make an American Quilt*. In addition to her delightful cast of characters, she provides practical instructions on the art of quilting. Contrast the experiences of reading a novel to viewing a film.

2. Encourage students to read Ken Kesey’s 1962 novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and compare the change in point of view from the novel to the film.

3. In addition to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the following films have portrayed the use of psychosurgery as an instrument of social control: *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Frances*. Research the lives of Rose Williams and Frances Farmer to investigate the people who inspired these stories.

4. Mental illness has always been a popular subject for filmmakers and a source of fascination for filmgoers. Perhaps students will be motivated to see some
of the following: The Snake Pit, David and Lisa, The Three Faces of Eve, Blue Skies, Shine, Rain Man, As Good as It Gets, Girl Interrupted. Research the type of mental illness represented in each film.

5. Research Frederick Wiseman’s 1967 documentary, Titicut Follies, which explores life inside a Massachusetts hospital for mentally ill convicts. The film was censored for twenty-five years because the state of Massachusetts did not appreciate Wiseman’s exposure of Bridgewater State Prison’s inadequate facilities. Contrast the treatments of mental illness in a documentary to a fictional film.


7. Physical handicaps have also been the subjects of popular films. Two that are exceptional in this category are The Elephant Man and My Left Foot. Investigating the actual case histories would be a valuable activity.

Videos Cited

The Breakfast Club, 1985, John Hughes, R, 97 min.
How to Make an American Quilt, 1995, Jocelyn Moorhouse, PG13, 116 min.
One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, 1975, Milos Foreman, R, 133 min.

Works Cited

Small, Jr., Robert C., Chair, and Members of the NCTE Standing Committee on Teacher Preparation and Certification. 1996. Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
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