Teaching Students to Write

Argument
Essays That Define
Comparison/Contrast Essays
Personal Narratives

Research Reports
Fictional Narratives

Peter Smagorinsky
Larry R. Johannessen
Elizabeth A. Kahn
Thomas M. McCann

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH
CONTENTS

Preface  v

Why Teach Students to Write Research Reports?  1

CHAPTER 1
Teaching the Argumentation Research Report  5

CHAPTER 2
Teaching the Research Report About Literature  58

CHAPTER 3
What Makes This a Structured Process Approach?  74

References  87
A "literary" research report may explore the connections between a literary work and the author’s life, analyze the work’s social or cultural milieu, or interpret the work based on evaluations by literary critics. This chapter describes lessons in which students write a research paper exploring the concept of the American dream in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. The materials and activities can be adapted for other literary works and other concepts.

Stage 1. Gateway Activity: Defining the American Dream

The instruction begins by prompting students’ interest in the concept of the American dream. Students explore their own knowledge and opinions as preparation for analyzing the concept within a literary work.

**EPISODE 1.1.** Have students, in small groups, complete Figure 2–1, “What Is the American Dream?” Since the groups’ rankings and ratings invariably differ, lead a follow-up whole-class discussion in which students debate their views and the meaning of the American dream.
Figure 2–1. What Is the American Dream?

Directions for Part 1: Rank each of the following statements from the one that most expresses the meaning of the American dream (1) to the one that least expresses the meaning of the American dream (14):

a. The American dream is the freedom to honestly pursue one’s goals.

b. The true meaning of the American dream is laid out in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

c. The American dream is the ability, through participation in the society and economy, of everyone to achieve prosperity.

d. The American dream is more about spiritual happiness than material goods.

e. Home ownership is the American dream.

f. Being your own boss, having your own business, or becoming rich and famous is the American dream.

g. The American dream is an idea that all people can succeed through hard work and that all people have the potential to live happy, successful lives.

h. The American dream means equal opportunity for all, regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and national origin.

i. The American dream is to have all the necessities of life.

j. The American dream is going from rags to riches through thrift and hard work.

(continues)
Figure 2–1. What Is the American Dream? (continued)

k. The American dream is to make do with less and have more time for family, leisure, and volunteering.

l. “Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. . . . that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

m. The American dream is to live in a bountiful environment with an abundance of land, water, forest, farmlands, wildlife, and wilderness.

n. The American dream is to be able to leave a legacy to future generations after one’s death.

Directions for Part 2: Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

1. Anyone who wants to can achieve the American dream.
   ___ Strongly Agree ___ Somewhat Agree ___ Somewhat Disagree ___ Strongly Disagree

2. Working hard is the most important element for getting ahead.
   ___ Strongly Agree ___ Somewhat Agree ___ Somewhat Disagree ___ Strongly Disagree

3. Hard work and determination do not guarantee success.
   ___ Strongly Agree ___ Somewhat Agree ___ Somewhat Disagree ___ Strongly Disagree

4. The American dream is out of reach for some Americans, making it more of a cruel joke than a genuine dream.
Figure 2–1. What Is the American Dream? (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. “Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude.” (Thomas Jefferson)</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “You can have anything you want—if you want it badly enough. You can be anything you want to be, do anything you set out to accomplish if you hold to that desire with singleness of purpose.” (Abraham Lincoln)</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The American dream is still alive today.</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The genes you are born with and/or the environment you are born into can limit your ability to achieve the American dream.</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Episode 1.2.** Have students write about one or two of the statements in part 2 about which they have a strong positive or negative viewpoint. This helps them achieve a deeper understanding of the American dream before they examine it within a literary work.
Stage 2: Analyzing and Interpreting the Primary Source

**EPISODE 2.1.** Have students read *Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck. Ask them to look for the various characters’ views of the American dream. As they read, have them, individually or in small groups, complete the chart in Figure 2–2. Periodically lead a whole-class discussion of these characters’ views of the American dream—what it means to them, whether they see it as achievable, what they see as obstacles to achieving it, whether their conception of it changes, and so forth.

You may need to include other activities to ensure that students understand the novel. You might have students research the setting (time period and location), note any questions they have as they are reading, research the Robert Burns poem “To a Mouse” to which the title alludes, make connections between the Burns poem and the novel, and so forth.

**EPISODE 2.2.** After students have finished reading the novel, ask them what they think Steinbeck is saying about the American dream through the characters and events. Encourage them to present evidence and warrants to support their views. Have them discuss their ideas in small groups or as a whole class or both.

Stage 3: Researching Critical Controversies

Students usually write a better research paper about a work of literature when they participate in critical conversations—when they examine differing viewpoints, debate them, and argue a position. As Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein explain, “Experienced writing instructors have long recognized that writing well means entering into conversation with others. Academic writing in particular calls upon writers not simply to express their own ideas, but to do so as a response to what others have said” (2006, ix). Help students enter this conversation by identifying aspects of a work that are the subject of debate by literary critics. (Frame the debate in terms your students will understand.)
**Figure 2-2. Of Mice and Men and the American Dream**

Explain what the American dream is or means to each of the following characters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>What is the character’s definition of the American dream? What does the character say or believe about the American dream?</th>
<th>Find quotations from the novel that reveal the character’s definition and views of the American dream.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crooks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curley’s wife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One controversy related to *Of Mice and Men* is whether the ending is optimistic or pessimistic. Some critics argue that the ending is optimistic, that Steinbeck is suggesting that the characters have overcome obstacles and are on their way to attaining the American dream. Others argue that the ending is pessimistic, that Steinbeck is suggesting that attaining the American dream is impossible for many.

**Figure 2–3. Critical Viewpoints: Of Mice and Men and the American Dream**, contains excerpts from six critical commentaries on the novel. Ask students, individually or in small groups, to read these critical viewpoints. Have them answer the following questions about each source:

- Does the writer/do the writers think Steinbeck is optimistic or pessimistic about the potential for achieving the American dream?
- How do you know?
- What reasons and/or evidence does the writer/do the writers give to support this view?

*Figure 2–3. Critical Viewpoints: Of Mice and Men and the American Dream*

“Readers of *Of Mice and Men* have argued about whether the ending is bleak and fatalistic (that is, that George will now just become like all the rest of the lonely ‘boys’ and grow old, poor, and dispensable like Candy and Crooks) or whether it is hopeful (that George and Slim will now forge a friendship that will allow them to aspire to a better life). Regardless of how one interprets the conclusion, which Steinbeck leaves mysterious and unspoken, the story . . . is an affirmation of the qualities of ‘our species’ to rise above base nature.”

“The fact that the setting for *Of Mice and Men* is a California valley dictates, according to the symbolism of Steinbeck’s landscapes, that this story will take place in a fallen world and that the quest for the illusive and illusory American Eden will be of central thematic significance.” (p. 145)

“The dream of George and Lennie represents a desire to defy the curse of Cain and fallen man—to break the pattern of wandering and loneliness imposed on the outcasts and to return to the perfect garden. George and Lennie achieve all of this dream that is possible in the real world: they are their brother’s keepers. Unlike the solitary Cain and the solitary men who inhabit the novel, they have someone who cares. The dream of the farm merely symbolizes their deep mutual commitment, a commitment that is immediately sensed by the other characters in the novel. The ranch owner is suspicious of the relationship, protesting, ‘I never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy.’ . . . The influence of George and Lennie’s mutual commitment, and of their dream, has for an instant made these crippled sons of Cain their brother’s keepers and broken the grip of loneliness and solitude in which they exist.” (pp. 146–47)

“The death of the dream, however, does not force *Of Mice and Men* to end on the strong note of pessimism critics have consistently claimed. For while the dream of the farm perishes, the theme of commitment achieves its strongest statement in the book’s conclusion. Unlike Candy, who abandons responsibility for his old dog and allows Carlson to shoot him, George remains his brother’s keeper without faltering even to the point of killing Lennie while Lennie sees visions of Eden. In accepting complete responsibility for Lennie, George demonstrates the degree of commitment necessary to the Steinbeck hero, and in fact enters the ranks of those heroes.” (p. 148)
Figure 2–3. Critical Viewpoints: Of Mice and Men and the American Dream (continued)

“[I]t should be noted that this novel about man’s loneliness and ‘apartness’ began with two men—George and Lennie—climbing down to the pool from the highway and that the novel ends with two men—George and Slim—climbing back up from the pool to the highway. Had George been left alone and apart from the rest of humanity at the end of the novel, had he suffered the fate of Cain, this would indeed have been the most pessimistic of Steinbeck’s works. That George is not alone has tremendous significance. In the fallen world of the valley, where human commitment is the only realizable dream, the fact that in the end as in the beginning two men walk together causes Of Mice and Men to end on a strong note of hope—the crucial dream, the dream of man’s commitment to man, has not perished with Lennie.” (p. 149)


“One aspect of the dream that George repeatedly describes to Lennie also needs scrutiny. . . . The dream not only gives a direction to their lives, but also makes them feel different from other people. Since this sense of difference can mean little to Lennie, it is part of the consolation George receives from the dream. George wants to be superior. With Lennie gone, his claim to distinction will be gone. Thus when George shoots Lennie, he is not destroying only the shared dream. He is also destroying the thing that makes him different and reducing himself to the status of an ordinary guy. . . . This is a story not of man’s defeat at the hands of an implacable nature, but of man’s painful conquest of this nature and of his difficult, conscious rejection of his dreams of greatness and acceptance of his own mediocrity.” (pp. 134–35)

“All the characters in the novel are living lies. Curley knows his marriage will never work out but will not admit it. His wife knows there never was a show business career for her, but she will continue to tell the story at the drop of a hat. George knows that he will never have a farm of his own, but he keeps talking himself and Lennie into it. And Candy knows his dog cannot live without his constant care and that he also needs constant care to survive.” (p. 43)

“By losing Lennie, George becomes just like any other man. . . . However, this tragedy offers a glimmer of hope. George is not walking off a total loner—he is walking off with Slim. Just two ordinary men walking off, but together. . . . Both Slim and George are very understanding men, and they are sensitive to what has just happened. They are not fictional dreamers, the kind George pretended to be for Lennie’s sake. Perhaps their dream of owning a farm is more realizable now that they have formed a phalanx and accepted their status as average men.” (pp. 46–47)


“In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck presents [his] philosophy through the eventual negation of George and Lennie’s dream, which is taken away by the events occurring in their life, the things that happen to them to show the dream, or end, to be merely a fantasy. Of Mice and Men’s major theme of naturalism . . . is consistent with the philosophy of the author and the scientist.

“Naturalism is the idea that the scientific facts of heredity and environment are the forces controlling human existence, and neither human will nor divine assistance can alter the course determined by heredity and environment. Both forces are clearly functioning in Of Mice and Men.
Figure 2–3. Critical Viewpoints: Of Mice and Men and the American Dream (continued)

George and Lennie are bindlestiffs because that is the class worker to which they belong by the facts of their birth, their potential, and the socioeconomic circumstances of their environment. Their attempts to change the circumstances are shown to be impossible.”

—Cynthia Burkhead, from Student Companion to John Steinbeck (pp. 58–59), published in Westport, CT, in 2002 by Greenwood Press.

"Was Lennie’s death at George’s hand the inevitable outcome of events, or did George have other choices? In spite of Slim’s approval ['You hadda, George. I swear you hadda’ OMM, 107], it is obvious that George was acting willfully when he killed Lennie: he did not have to kill his partner; he chose to do so. Though one could argue that George took Carlson’s Luger in order to protect himself and Lennie against the advances of the mob, such speculation seems unlikely.

"It is far more reasonable to assume that George planned to shoot Lennie as soon as he discovered that Lennie had killed Curley’s wife. By killing Lennie, George consciously decides to give his friend the only protection available to him. With the fatal pistol shot, George rationalizes that he has sent Lennie off to the dream farm forever. By the time George walks away from the grove with Slim, he has let go of the escape dream for himself as well and has embraced the competing dream of living without Lennie and just being one of the guys. . . . [Steinbeck] makes one thing very clear: George’s pulling the trigger is a reaction to the voices of a cruel reality from which neither he nor Lennie can escape any longer."

**EPISODE 3.2.** After students have examined the different viewpoints presented in the excerpted critical articles, have them use Figure 2–4 to analyze the arguments on each side of the controversy. Encourage them to include any points and evidence they have thought of in addition to what they have found in the critical articles.

---

**Stage 4: Drafting a Literary Research Paper**

**EPISODE 4.1.** Have students use Figure 2–5 to plan and organize their ideas for writing. When they have finished, quickly check their work to be sure everyone is on the right track. Meet individually with any students who are struggling, or have them work with a peer.

**EPISODE 4.2.** Have students write a draft of their paper and bring it to class for peer review. Ask them, in small groups, to use the guidelines in Figure 1–11 (see Chapter 1) to review one another’s writing: has the writer summarized the critical controversy, taken a position, developed strong, logical arguments with evidence and warrants, and effectively addressed counterarguments and counterevidence?

**EPISODE 4.3.** Review effective ways to incorporate quotations from sources, both primary and secondary (see Stage 4 in Chapter 1) and an appropriate bibliographic form for citing sources that students reference in their papers (see Stage 6 in Chapter 1).

**EPISODE 4.4.** Encourage students to revise their writing based on the feedback from their group.

**EPISODE 4.5.** When students have completed their papers, provide a forum in which they can share their writing (a classroom wiki or website, for example) and thus extend the critical conversation. You can also extend the critical conversation by having students exchange papers with students in another class or at another school, read them, and write responses.
Figure 2–4. Analyzing the Arguments

Literary critics have presented opposing interpretations of John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. Some argue that the novel is pessimistic and that it suggests that for some people the American dream is impossible to achieve. Others argue that ultimately the ending of the novel is optimistic and that the novel suggests that the American dream is achievable for George and others like him. What are the claims and/or evidence on each side of this issue?

| The ending is optimistic, suggesting the possibility of achieving the American dream. | The novel is pessimistic, suggesting the impossibility of achieving the American dream. |
Introduction summarizing the interpretive debate (what are the different viewpoints, who is taking what positions, and what are their arguments?):

Your thesis (position on the issue stated in Figure 2–4):

What is your first argument (claim) in support of your position?

Evidence from OMM:

Warrant:

Evidence from OMM:

Warrant:

What is your second argument (claim) in support of your position?

Evidence from OMM:

Warrant:

Evidence from OMM:

Warrant:

(continues)
Figure 2–5. Planning and Organizing (continued)

What is your third argument (claim) in support of your position?

Evidence from OMM:

Warrant:

Evidence from OMM:

Warrant:

What is one argument made by one of the critics on the other side of this issue?

What evidence does this critic use to support his or her argument?

What is your response or rebuttal to this argument (be sure to include evidence and warrant)?

What is another argument made by another one of the critics on the other side of this issue?

What evidence does this critic use to support his or her argument?

What is your response or rebuttal to this argument (be sure to include evidence and warrant)?
Extensions

1. Have students write a research paper on another literary work. Ask them to find a point of disagreement in the critical literature about the work and write an argument taking a position on the issue.

2. Ask students to evaluate a work of literature in relation to its historical period. How did Thoreau represent a Transcendentalist perspective? Was Richard Wright a Realist or a Naturalist? How accurate is Shakespeare’s portrayal of thirteenth-century society in Verona and Mantua in *Romeo and Juliet*?

3. Let students experiment with other ways of presenting research: produce a media slide show or a website that sorts through the critical issues in a literary work, contribute to web-based listservs and bulletin boards, speak in public forums.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.