Study Guide for *So, What’s the Story? Teaching Narrative to Understand Ourselves, Others and the World*

**Purpose:** This reading guide can be used as a vehicle for discussion or an exchange of ideas with colleagues as part of a study or reading group as well as a resource for generating ideas, plans, and lessons you can undertake with your students.

The focus of this book is assisting teachers in thinking about what they want their students to be able to do and understand as readers and writers of narrative as well as how they can design instruction that helps students inquire into the ways narrative works in the world.

### Before Reading To Think About

You may wish to use the following questions to begin your discussion before you read *So, What’s the Story? Teaching Narrative to Understand Ourselves, Others, and the World.*

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<th>REACT (Respond to the quotation with comments, connections, and questions)</th>
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<td>What is your current classroom practice in regard to narrative?</td>
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<td>When it comes to writing instruction, narrative tends to be the focus in a language arts classroom. Why do you think that is?</td>
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<td>The ancient rhetoricians started with imitation and style and didn’t move to narrative until late in their training. What is the benefit of starting with narrative? What might be the downside?</td>
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The CCSS anchor standard for narrative reads: “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.” What questions do you have about getting students to this standard?
What’s the place of storytelling in your own experience?
Chapter 1 An Introduction to Our Approach

Chapter 1 explains the foundations of instruction that are used in exploring narrative in the text. It gets at the questions *What is the importance of narrative?* and *Why is narrative important to teach?*

“This might seem like a lofty claim, but we think narrative permeates and both explicitly and implicitly informs so much of our lives and so much of the way cultures operate that teaching narrative has to be about much more than the form of a story—that is, it has to be about more than identifying the protagonist or naming the climax of a story or using the Freytag Pyramid (or Freytag Triangle, if you prefer) to figure out what was or what needs to be included in a story” (2).
Understanding the procedural nature of the CCSS will assist teachers in getting at the content. Look through the standards for writing narrative at your grade level and at the level before and after you. What are the expectations for your students? What will they do before and after you in regard to narrative?
In what ways do you address the four kinds of knowledge as found in the chart on page 7? What areas would you want to work on in making sure students get at form and substance? What do you make of “The what is learned best through the how” (8) in terms of your own teaching?
Chapter 2 Why Narratives Matter: Knowledge of Purposes and Contexts

In Chapter 2, the authors explore how narratives function in our culture. They make the argument that for students to really understand purpose and context of narrative, we must exceed the CCSS expectations. This understanding is important in apprenticing students as “ethnographers of story in their communities and culture . . .” (23). They cite personal, professional, and outside-of-teaching examples of narrative function as well as activities you can use with students to get at purpose and context. What is the function and purpose of narrative in our society?

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<th>REACT</th>
<th>“What each of these (and other practice-based, human professions) share is the idea that narrative understanding can help people make sense of what they expected, what went awry or broke that expectation, and what they might see as new possibilities” (20).</th>
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The authors argue that for students to have the necessary understanding of narrative we need to exceed the CCSS. What are your thoughts about how stories operate in communities beyond just us telling them? In what ways will you need to expand your teaching of narrative (and looking at your specific grade level standards what the CCSS will expect you to do)?
Share or think about some stories that have had an impact on you both in the classroom and outside. In looking back at these stories, what do you notice about purpose and context? What interactional and social contexts are at play?
Take Action

Try one of the narrative activities listed on pages 22–23 with your students. What did they come up with? In what way did they meet standards for narrative? In what ways did they exceed the CCSS?
Chapter 3 Thinking About the Substance of Stories

Chapter 3 focuses on the procedural knowledge necessary for students to compose narratives and the complexity of the choices a writer of narrative must make. There are several activities for students to get at each of the elements of narrative that are explored. What choices are made in crafting narrative?

“The possibilities for talk are virtually endless. What’s important in whatever alternative you choose is that students have a chance to develop an articulated understanding of what they did and why they did it. Such an understanding is crucial in fostering transfer” (36).

REACT

(Respond to the quotation with comments, connections, and questions.)
The authors discuss specifically the wording of “event” and “event sequences” from the CCSS narrative anchor standard. What kinds of thinking do you see students having to do to make the decisions they list throughout the chapter? How might these processes be valuable to students?
How conscious are you of the choices you make when telling a story? Which activities in the chapter are you interested in trying and in what context (an essential question?) would you use them in your curriculum?
Chapter 4 Shaping the Substance of Stories

Chapter 4 gives lesson ideas that engage students in composing to practice and composing to plan to help develop procedural knowledge of substance and form. The authors highlight specifics in the CCSS in regard to narrative and provides graphic organizers and tools for students to work through the choices necessary in creating compelling narratives. How do we guide students through the choices a writer must make in crafting narrative?

"These are sophisticated and complex moves, and students will need significant instructional assistance and lots of opportunities for composing to practice to achieve these ends" (52).

(Respond to the quotation with comments, connections, and questions.)
In each section highlight the CCSS for your grade level. Which composing activities will get at the standards for your students?
What value do you see in the sharing of student ideas for dramatic scenes, filters and slants, storyworlds, and time? What ideas have you generated as a result of looking through the sample prompts? What other mentor texts could you use as models for students?
Chapter 5 Narrative Nonfiction: Writing About the Self

In Chapter 5, the authors focus on a specific narrative assignment and the sequence of instruction that helps students develop the five kinds of knowledge. This specific sequence deals with autobiographical writing. What would a sequence of instruction for a narrative assignment look like?

“... if we want our students to engage in ‘knowledge transforming’ (in Bereiter and Scardamalia’s terms), we have to help them craft compelling scenes and effectively shift between narrating the story of the past events and narrating the meaning they see in those events” (70).
Read through the sequence of instruction for the autobiographical piece described in Chapter 5. Looking through the CCSS for middle school (6–8), identify which standards are being covered.
Think about assignments that you have crafted that not only accomplish the standards or curricular goals you have outlined, but also help foster a sense of community in your classroom. Why were these successful? What elements need to be in place for students to engage in community in the classroom? How does narrative foster this?
Chapter 6 Narrative Nonfiction as Literary Journalism

Chapter 6 focuses on a profile assignment, including the instructional sequence and formative assessments in the process of creating this longer piece. Students are engaged in activities that help them observe, question, and grapple with a larger essential question. Through this sequence, students exhibit declarative knowledge of form and substance. How do we teach students to write a specific kind of narrative? In Chapter 5, the authors focus on a specific narrative assignment and the sequence of instruction that helps students develop the five kinds of knowledge. This specific sequence deals with autobiographical writing. What would a sequence of instruction for a narrative assignment look like?

“In short, students will need to be able to tell the stories of others, both accurately and evocatively, both in and out of school, because it helps them understand how others see the world, which in turn provides an opportunity for students to extend, refine, or challenge the way they understand themselves. We need to plan instruction that invites students to discover and understand the way others make sense of their lives” (85).
<table>
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<th>RELATE TO THE CCSS</th>
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<td>Take a close look at the CCSS and what standards are addressed in the process of creating this profile. What will be observable and measurable in the final product that shows students are achieving the CCSS standards? What takes them beyond writing narrative?</td>
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Brainstorm some assignments and essential questions that you can use in your curriculum that invite students “to discover and understand the way others make sense of their lives.”
Chapter 7 Writing Imaginative Narratives

Chapter 7 discusses the instructional sequence for composing an imaginative narrative tied to the inquiry question *What does it mean to cope with loss in a healthy way?* The chapter answers for us *How might we teach imaginative narrative in a way that gets at inquiry as well as have students expose and reflect on the choices the writer must make along the way?*

“When we ask students to create stories, we know that some of our students will feel anxious and sometimes frozen. Creating a story, like any creative act, takes a certain element of courage, and we would be remiss not to mention the emotions our students face when engaging in the writing of a short story. . . .” (112).
The instructional sequence of the imaginative narrative outlined in this chapter gets at several of the CCSS. Which are the most prominent standards addressed through this process? What other standards are covered in this sequence?
How might the sequence outlined in this chapter be different than what you do in regard to teaching narrative in your classroom? How do you account for the differences? What changes do you see yourself making instructionally in your approach to narrative in the classroom? What units of study do you have in your curriculum that you could incorporate narrative into?
## Chapter 8 Composing Narratives with Words and Images

In Chapter 8, the authors outline an instructional sequence culminating with student production of a picture book relating to the inquiry question *To what principles do people owe their primary allegiance?* The authors attempt to answer the question *How do we assist students in composing narratives with words and images and what importance do these kinds of narratives hold?*

> “But as Nobis and Katie Wood Ray suggest, when students compose narratives using both words and images, when students examine and speculate about the choices other writers use when composing with words and images, then students have accessible concrete opportunities to understand narrative principles and to understand themselves as writers” (131).
<p>| The focus on Task, Audience, and Purpose in the CCSS keeps these important frames of reference on students’ minds as they compose. What is the task, audience, and purpose for the picture book? What other kinds of narrative that use words and images can you use in your classroom? What would the task, audience, and purpose be for an assignment you could integrate into your curriculum? |</p>
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<th>REFLECT</th>
<th>What do you see in our culture that highlights the importance of students being able to work with narratives that include words and images? How do they acquire these skills in the process?</th>
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Poll your students and ask them what media they see on a regular basis that include narratives with words and images. Ask them to list activities they have done in school that involve composing or reading these kinds of texts.
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<td>Chapter 9 concludes the text by focusing on answering the chapter title. How can narrative serve young people? What is the place of narrative in the overall picture of the CCSS?</td>
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| “But we realize that the CCSS and the assessments that are being developed to measure them place more emphasis on argument and exposition than they do on narrative in the upper grades, so we worry a bit that the writing of narrative will be underemphasized as teachers and schools respond to these assessments. In our minds, that would be a huge mistake” (152). |

| REACT (Respond to the quotation with comments, connections, and questions.) |  |
The authors argue that the CCSS are designed to make sure that all students are prepared for college and the world of work. What skills do you see students developing in the kinds of activities outlined in this book that will prepare them for both?
What conclusions have you come to in regard to the teaching of narrative after reading this book? What takeaways are most prominent for you and your teaching?