

## USING INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

### English I, Unit 1

### Ruston High School Examples

#### OUR OBJECTIVES:

- Teachers understand the importance of integrating **informational texts** into their curricula.
- Teachers understand the importance of developing students' ability to **respond to complex texts**.

As educators, we must objectively—and painfully—ask ourselves the following questions: are we as teachers serving the goals of a true education? Are our students truly college and career ready? And, candidly, I can say that as a country, as a state, as a district, as individuals, we can do better.

In the summer of 2011, I got my first glimpse of the Common Core State Standards, and my pulse quickened. Not from fear. Not from anxiety. From excitement. I liked what I saw: a challenging set of standards that would truly provide students with a quality education. I realized that as a state and as a country, we were about to enter a new era of education. Most educators will tell you that although they worry about some students not being able to achieve these higher standards, they truly do want the best and most rigorous expectations for their students. I believe that much of the criticism of the standards has a root in fear, the fear of change or the misunderstanding or misuse of the standards. Many feel paralyzed by the changes and simply do not know how to start a sweeping remodel of their curriculum. Teachers read and understand the standards, but the question on everyone's minds is often "how?"

At the start of the 2013-14 school year, the Louisiana Department of Education launched some sample year long plans and sample unit plans for both English/Language Arts and math to demonstrate to educators what a more rigorous curriculum could look like. Instead of dictating what had to be taught, the DOE offered models so that teachers could, for the first time, exercise professional judgments and make curricular decisions that would best suit their students. Although Lincoln Parish English/Language Arts has been in the process of aligning to the CCSS for a number of years, I was eager to get my hands on these samples to see if what we were doing measured up. I was thrilled to receive affirmation for many of the changes that we've already made, and I was happy to use some of their ideas to strengthen my existing curriculum. I implemented most of the state plan for my second ninth grade unit.

What follows are the original performance tasks provided by the Louisiana Department of Education that I implemented with my English I students, as well as commentary on how I used these helpful resources in my classroom.

## *Superman and Me*

SHERMAN ALEXIE

Sherman J. Alexie Jr. (b. 1966), a member of the Spokane and the Coeur d'Alene tribes, grew up on the Spokane Reservation in Washington state. A graduate of Washington State University, he has published eighteen books, including *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1983), a short-story collection that received a PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction. One of the stories in this collection was the basis for the movie *Smoke Signals* (1999), for which Alexie wrote the screenplay. An activist for Native American rights and culture, Alexie wrote the following essay describing the impact of reading on his life. It was originally published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1998.

I learned to read with a Superman comic book. Simple enough, I suppose. I cannot recall which particular Superman comic book I read, nor can I remember which villain he fought in that issue. I cannot remember the plot, nor the means by which I obtained the comic book. What I can remember is this: I was 3 years old, a Spokane Indian boy living with his family on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington state. We were poor by most standards, but one of my parents usually managed to find some minimum-wage job or another, which made us middle-class by reservation standards. I had a brother and three sisters. We lived on a combination of irregular paychecks, hope, fear and government surplus food.

My father, who is one of the few Indians who went to Catholic school on purpose, was an avid reader of westerns, spy thrillers, murder mysteries, gangster epics, basketball player biographies and anything else he could find. He bought his books by the pound at Dutch's Pawn Shop, Goodwill, Salvation Army and Value Village. When he had extra money, he bought new novels at supermarkets, convenience stores and hospital gift shops. Our house was filled with books. They were stacked in crazy piles in the bathroom, bedrooms and living room. In a fit of unemployment-inspired creative energy, my father built a set of bookshelves and soon filled them with a random assortment of books about the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, the Vietnam War and the entire 23-book series of the Apache westerns. My father loved books, and since I loved my father with an aching devotion, I decided to love books as well.

I can remember picking up my father's books before I could read. The words themselves were mostly foreign, but I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common pur-

pose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted me. I began to think of everything in terms of paragraphs. Our reservation was a small paragraph within the United States. My family's house was a paragraph, distinct from the other paragraphs of the LeBrets to the north, the Fords to our south and the Tribal School to the west. Inside our house, each family member existed as a separate paragraph but still had genetics and common experiences to link us. Now, using this logic, I can see my changed family as an essay of seven paragraphs: mother, father, older brother, the deceased sister, my younger twin sisters and our adopted little brother.

At the same time I was seeing the world in paragraphs, I also picked up that Superman comic book. Each panel, complete with picture, dialogue and narrative was a three-dimensional paragraph. In one panel, Superman breaks through a door. His suit is red, blue and yellow. The brown door shatters into many pieces. I look at the narrative above the picture. I cannot read the words, but I assume it tells me that "Superman is breaking down the door." Aloud, I pretend to read the words and say, "Superman is breaking down the door." Words, dialogue, also float out of Superman's mouth. Because he is breaking down the door, I assume he says, "I am breaking down the door." Once again, I pretend to read the words and say aloud, "I am breaking down the door." In this way, I learned to read.

This might be an interesting story all by itself: A little Indian boy teaches himself to read at an early age and advances quickly. He reads *Grapes of Wrath* in kindergarten when other children are struggling through *Dick and Jane*. If he'd been anything but an Indian boy living on the reservation, he might have been called a prodigy. But he is an Indian boy living on the reservation and is simply an oddity. He grows into a man who often speaks of his childhood in the third-person, as if it will somehow dull the pain and make him sound more modest about his talents.

A smart Indian is a dangerous person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike. I fought with my classmates on a daily basis. They wanted me to stay quiet when the non-Indian teacher asked for answers, for volunteers, for help. We were Indian children who were expected to be stupid. Most lived up to those expectations inside the classroom but subverted them on the outside. They struggled with basic reading in school but could remember how to sing a few dozen powwow songs. They were monosyllabic in front of their non-Indian teachers but could tell complicated stories and jokes at the dinner table. They submissively ducked their heads when confronted by a non-Indian adult but would slug it out with the Indian bully who was 10 years older. As Indian children, we were expected to fail in the non-Indian world. Those who failed were ceremonially accepted by other Indians and appropriately pitied by non-Indians. I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky. I read books late into the night, until I could barely keep my eyes open. I read books at recess, then

during lunch and in the few minutes left after I had finished my classroom assignments. I read books in the car when my family traveled to powwows or basketball games. In shopping malls, I ran to the bookstores and read bits and pieces of as many books as I could. I read the books my father brought home from the pawnshops and secondhand. I read the books I borrowed from the library. I read the backs of cereal boxes. I read the newspaper. I read the bulletins posted on the walls of the school, the clinic, the tribal offices, the post office. I read junk mail. I read auto-repair manuals. I read magazines. I read anything that had words and paragraphs. I read with equal parts joy and desperation. I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life.

Despite all the books I read, I am still surprised I became a writer. I was going to be a pediatrician. These days, I write novels, short stories, and poems. I visit schools and teach creative writing to Indian kids. In all my years in the reservation school system, I was never taught how to write poetry, short stories or novels. I was certainly never taught that Indians wrote poetry, short stories and novels. Writing was something beyond Indians. I cannot recall a single time that a guest teacher visited the reservation. There must have been visiting teachers. Who were they? Where are they now? Do they exist? I visit the schools as often as possible. The Indian kids crowd the classroom. Many are writing their own poems, short stories and novels. They have read my books. They have read many other books. They look at me with bright eyes and arrogant wonder. They are trying to save their lives. Then there are the sullen and already defeated Indian kids who sit in the back rows and ignore me with theatrical precision. The pages of their notebooks are empty. They carry neither pencil nor pen. They stare out the window. They refuse and resist. "Books," I say to them. "Books," I say. I throw my weight against their locked doors. The door holds. I am smart. I am arrogant. I am lucky. I am trying to save our lives.

## TEACHING THE NARRATIVE: TEACHER WORK

### My Reading Life: Betty's Books

On Saturdays in the summer, we would load up in the van to go to Betty's Used Books. Armed with paper sacks full of *New York Times* best sellers picked up by my flight attendant aunt on her many international flights, we would walk noisily through the door, over the threshold into a magical world. Mom would negotiate with Betty, determining just how much credit we would receive for our trade. I remember the precarious stacks of paperbacks, nearly toppling over into the narrow aisles, the embarrassing romance novels with the ridiculous scenes of a rippling, shirtless Fabio cradling a damsel in distress. Past the classics, past the Cliff's Notes, past the Westerns was the corner I was bound for. Make a left, then a right, and I was there: the children's section.

Mom's words echoed in my mind: "get whatever you want"—unheard of words in any other arena save this majestic little corner of the universe: Betty's Books. I would sit on a plastic stool until my legs bore the marks of tiny ridges and look up, up, up at the towering shelves. I knew that my mom would sit and read to me that night—and every night. We would sit in bed, and she would read and read, yawning as she turned page after page. I didn't know then what I know now: it would have been far easier for her to just put me to bed. A mom of three who worked full-time and kept an impossibly clean house must have been tired. She read to me.

Elementary school, junior high. High school. I drove myself to Betty's Books to get the books required for junior and senior English at Byrd High School. College. Marriage. Grad School. Baby. Twenty-five or some odd years later, I pull up, unload the stroller and hand Hannah some cheerios to keep her happy. She happily kicks her off her left ballet flat, so I give up and take the right one off before we walk in. Betty retired in 2009, and now it's Peanut's Thrifty Used Books. But it's the same. The toppling stacks, the indulgent romances, the Cliff's Notes (and SparkNotes) for slacker students. Around the piles, under the steep columns of yellowing pages, I navigate the stroller carefully.

"Da, Da, Da, DA!" Hannah cries in glee, pointing her tiny finger at the tall shelves laden with books, stories, moments, memories teeming with life, awaiting new readers. I wonder how many of these old books are mine from long ago. Her blue eyes widening, she shrieks with delight at all the colors. I sit down on the now tiny stool, roll Hannah close, and start handing her board books. I will read to her.

## TEACHING THE NARRATIVE: STUDENT WORK

### A Girl and her Love for Reading

Though it was close to a decade ago, I can still reminisce about one of my favorite books that I would read with my parents about a little girl and the love she had for her quilt. During this time, I was an only child living in a small apartment residing in a large city, meaning I had to find many means of entertainment. My daily schedule as a five year old included watching PBS kids in the morning, going on errands with my mother, and meandering about the house, but my favorite part of the day was the time I spent reading. Almost every night, especially during the summer before kindergarten, my father would return home from a day of work and together we would read about the girl and her love for her quilt (or any other story I managed to find). Our reading process would be composed of my father reading and every so often stopping mid sentence implying that I fill the void by meticulously sounding out the right word or phrase. By the end of the summer, I, the girl with a love for reading, was virtually inseparable from any book.

My heart racing, I entered my kindergarten classroom for the first time. Immediately, our teacher introduced our class to the art of reading to us all. We learned our vowels, studied phonics by sounding out words and sound, and were read to almost daily. I loved it. However, I soon realized that reading was not as loved by others as it as by me. I can still vividly remember a certain day in kindergarten when each student was to read a couple of sentences the teacher had assigned them. This assignment for reading was given a few days earlier and I had thoroughly

practiced my sentences at home, knowing how to read and pronounce each word, but when I arrived at school, my plans quickly altered. Because I knew so many students in my class did not care for reading, I attempted to show a lack of concern by feigning the way I read and purposefully letting the teacher chime in as much as possible to tell me the correct pronunciation of certain words- yet I knew all of the words in my assignment. By the end of my “presentation” I was instantaneously regretful and I am still to this day embarrassed because I know I could have done so much better and should have never undermined my ability. Later on, I would then have trouble increasing my reading speed because the faster I read, I felt the less I would comprehend so from then on, I would always practice more hoping only to improve.

Fast-forward ten years later and I am now a freshman in high school. All about, inside, and throughout my classrooms, books leap off of every shelf as if I were in my favorite store – Barnes and Noble. Since the beginning of high school, reading has become way more than a leisurely past time. Books are constantly creating more and more room for themselves in my life and in all of my subjects, from band to debate. Reading willingly, I now use text books more consistently, and read more classics and soon-to-be classics and I think this is amazing. I love it.

Nonfiction or fiction, each book has a story to tell. Each book is like a threshold to a new world. Each book manages to reinstate old information or bring forth new information in to our world. Each book represents an author, their ideas, the characters-real or fake- that an author wants the world to encounter, and the different places people dream of. It is amazing how all of these ideas are just typed words on paper bound together by a title and yet they still make an influence in the world like how the little girl and her quilt had a positive influence in my world. My history with reading has not been an easy timeline but it is the capability a book can have that will forever spark my interests. I am the girl with the love of reading.

## The New York Times

March 5, 2013

# The Country That Stopped Reading

By DAVID TOSCANA

EARLIER this week, I spotted, among the job listings in the newspaper Reforma, an ad from a restaurant in Mexico City looking to hire dishwashers. The requirement: a secondary school diploma.

Years ago, school was not for everyone. Classrooms were places for discipline, study. Teachers were respected figures. Parents actually gave them permission to punish their children by slapping them or tugging their ears. But at least in those days, schools aimed to offer a more dignified life.

Nowadays more children attend school than ever before, but they learn much less. They learn almost nothing. The proportion of the Mexican population that is literate is going up, but in absolute numbers, there are more illiterate people in Mexico now than there were 12 years ago. Even if baseline literacy, the ability to read a street sign or news bulletin, is rising, the practice of reading an actual book is not. Once a reasonably well-educated country, Mexico took the penultimate spot, out of 108 countries, in a Unesco assessment of reading habits a few years ago.

One cannot help but ask the Mexican educational system, “How is it possible that I hand over a child for six hours every day, five days a week, and you give me back someone who is basically illiterate?”

Despite recent gains in industrial development and increasing numbers of engineering graduates, Mexico is floundering socially, politically and economically because so many of its citizens do not read. Upon taking office in December, our new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, immediately announced a program to improve education. This is typical. All presidents do this upon taking office.

The first step in his plan to improve education? Put the leader of the teachers’ union, Elba Esther Gordillo, in jail — which he did last week. Ms. Gordillo, who has led the 1.5 million-member union for 23 years, is suspected of embezzling about \$200 million.

She ought to be behind bars, but education reform with a focus on teachers instead of



students is nothing new. For many years now, the job of the education secretary has been not to educate Mexicans but to deal with the teachers and their labor issues. Nobody in Mexico organizes as many strikes as the teachers' union. And, sadly, many teachers, who often buy or inherit their jobs, are lacking in education themselves.

During a strike in 2008 in Oaxaca, I remember walking through the temporary campground in search of a teacher reading a book. Among tens of thousands, I found not one. I did find people listening to disco-decibel music, watching television, playing cards or dominoes, vegetating. I saw some gossip magazines, too.

So I shouldn't have been surprised by the response when I spoke at a recent event for promoting reading for an audience of 300 or so 14- and 15-year-olds. "Who likes to read?" I asked. Only one hand went up in the auditorium. I picked out five of the ignorant majority and asked them to tell me why they didn't like reading. The result was predictable: they stuttered, grumbled, grew impatient. None was able to articulate a sentence, express an idea.

Frustrated, I told the audience to just leave the auditorium and go look for a book to read. One of their teachers walked up to me, very concerned. "We still have 40 minutes left," he said. He asked the kids to sit down again, and began to tell them a fable about a plant that couldn't decide if it wanted to be a flower or a head of cabbage.

"Sir," I whispered, "that story is for kindergartners."

In 2002, President Vicente Fox began a national reading plan; he chose as a spokesman Jorge Campos, a popular soccer player, ordered millions of books printed and built an immense library. Unfortunately, teachers were not properly trained and children were not given time for reading in school. The plan focused on the book instead of the reader. I have seen warehouses filled with hundreds of thousands of forgotten books, intended for schools and libraries, simply waiting for the dust and humidity to render them garbage.

A few years back, I spoke with the education secretary of my home state, Nuevo León, about reading in schools. He looked at me, not understanding what I wanted. "In school, children are taught to read," he said. "Yes," I replied, "but they don't read." I explained the difference between knowing how to read and actually reading, between deciphering street signs and accessing the literary canon. He wondered what the point of the students' reading "Don Quixote" was. He said we needed to teach them to read the newspaper.

When my daughter was 15, her literature teacher banished all fiction from her classroom.

“We’re going to read history and biology textbooks,” she said, “because that way you’ll read and learn at the same time.” In our schools, children are being taught what is easy to teach rather than what they need to learn. It is for this reason that in Mexico — and many other countries — the humanities have been pushed aside.

We have turned schools into factories that churn out employees. With no intellectual challenges, students can advance from one level to the next as long as they attend class and surrender to their teachers. In this light it is natural that in secondary school we are training chauffeurs, waiters and dishwashers.

This is not just about better funding. Mexico spends more than 5 percent of its gross domestic product on education — about the same percentage as the United States. And it’s not about pedagogical theories and new techniques that look for shortcuts. The educational machine does not need fine-tuning; it needs a complete change of direction. It needs to make students read, read and read.

But perhaps the Mexican government is not ready for its people to be truly educated. We know that books give people ambitions, expectations, a sense of dignity. If tomorrow we were to wake up as educated as the Finnish people, the streets would be filled with indignant citizens and our frightened government would be asking itself where these people got more than a dishwasher’s training.

*David Toscana is the author of the novel “The Last Reader.” This essay was translated by Kristina Cordero from the Spanish.*

## “THE COUNTRY THAT STOPPED READING”—STUDENT WORK

### When Reading Disappeared

In “The Country That Stopped Reading,” an article from The New York Times, author David Toscana argues that students should be reading all the time to increase their education. Toscana supports his claim by using personal anecdote and his own experiences. Based on the aggressive tone, Toscana is writing to well-educated Americans. As Toscana is speaking to “300 or so 14- and 15-year-olds,” he asked the question “Who likes to read?” As a result, “Only one hand went up in the auditorium”(2). By using a personal anecdote, his speech at the auditorium, Toscana is able to gain credibility showing that he experienced a time where his argument was true. The reader can imagine the auditorium, the hundreds of kids, the lonely hand in the sea of uneducated minds. When Toscana is wandering through a crowd of educators “in search of a teacher reading a book,” he states, “among tens of thousands, I found not one” (2), and he is able to grab the readers’ attention. Shocked and amazed, the reader wants to find out more and continues the story. Toscana is not only able to clearly get his point across, but the reader is also absorbing his arguments. Toscana’s purpose is to warn Americans about the dangers of not reading.