



Teacher Testimonial (Eighth Grade)

By Kaarin Greene (2005)

Last year I involved all three of my 8th grade English/Social Studies Core classes. I had a total of 73 students involved. I proposed individual word-count goals and they either agreed or negotiated a higher or lower goal. We did little else besides write one full period twice a week plus any personal writing time at home their schedule and interest allowed.

During NaNo Time, students were allowed to sit, sprawl, curl up, hide anywhere in the room while they were writing. This alone made all the students look forward to NaNo time. They really did write during this time, and when a student was stuck, they bounced ideas off each other.

One student--a VERY reticent writer was "adopted" by other students in the room who took turns sitting next to him and coaching him. Over the course of the month he wrote a little fewer than 1,000 words, but this was still a vast improvement over his previous work. Furthermore it did tell a story and he did try a few things with word choices.

An inspirational tool was the "bar graph" I created around the room. I copied a line drawing of the spine of book on which I printed "1,000 words". Every time the total word count went up by 1,000 words, I added a "book" to the bar that snaked around the top of the room. It made a good visual for Open House in the spring, too.

A handful of students wrote 8-11,000 words, one wrote 15,000 words, one wrote 30,000 words, one--whose parents let him register with NaNo so he received his winner's certificate--wrote 58,000, and one wrote 63,000. Most did not finish their stories, but 20-25% did. I was seeking fluency, so I did not make a completed story a part of the requirements. We did have lessons on writing and punctuating dialogue, on similes and metaphors, and on alliteration. Then students were required to include those devices in their stories--they were highlighted so I could find them for grading. Finally, I had students select a five-minute part of their writing and read it aloud to the class. Grades were based on meeting the word count goals and on including the required items mentioned above.

I saw a great deal of improvement in overall fluency that carried over into their expository writing. I also saw a reduction in writing anxiety when I made writing assignments. And I saw a bonding for the whole English class experience--my subject lost some of its bad reputation.

Total word count was 320,000 plus.

This year I will follow the same format of writing in-class all period twice a week. The two of us who participated last year sat down before school started and planned the following:

- * Monday: lesson
- * Tuesday: writing all period--include an example of the lesson in the writing
- * Thursday: lesson
- * Friday: writing all period--include an example of the lesson in the writing
- * Homework: to plan the next portion of the novel, or plan how to include the recent lesson in the story

- All writing to be done in a notebook--any word-processed pages done at home are to be glued/taped into the notebook
- Left-hand pages to be used for notes and practice from the lessons
- Right-hand pages to be used for the NaNo story--even if that means skipping lots of left-hand pages
- Repeated focus lessons during Sept. & Oct. on plot, on character development, on setting, and possibly mood.
- Lessons during Nov on dialogue, simile, and other figurative language
- Students have already been clued in about this project, as have parents
- Additional requirement: it must be a complete story with an intro, rising action, climax, and falling action/resolution
- Taking a page from a teacher in Long Island who used NaNo in her classroom last year: students will share excerpts and then vote to "Lit Circle" five or six of the stories (probably during fourth quarter).
- I learned today while recruiting parents for presentations as a part of a career unit, that one is a professional freelance writer, so I'm going to see if she'll help kick off our NaNo; I will also contact our local writer's organization and see if I can get any other published writers to share their experiences.
- Last year students were allowed to post "challenges" (e.g.: include Mary Poppins in your story) and when a student successfully included a challenge they got to go to the front of the room and ring a bell. I am NOT doing that this year as too many students concentrated on meeting the challenges and not enough on writing an interesting cohesive story.
- Last year we had hot chocolate available on NaNo days. I provided the cups and the hot water pot (I have an old 40 cup perculator). Students provided the cocoa mix. I'll do that again this year.