Building a Library with Student Authors

- Establish an “authors’ workshop” (at least 1 class hour a week) when your students can focus on turning any writing assignment from any subject area into their own book.
- Set up editing groups of 4 to 5 students who will follow a rotating schedule to:
  1. Discuss ideas for stories
  2. Share story research and drafts
  3. Provide feedback
  4. Offer help (e.g., making the book, copy editing, illustrating, cover designing)
  5. Announce new publications and put out call for book reviewers
- Allow students to work at their own pace, but require them to sign “author’s contracts” that briefly specify type of book, summarize plot, identify research needed, estimate page length, predict number of graphics/illustrations, and gauge time necessary to complete the project. If students want extensions, they can write a new contract explaining why.

Although you’re familiar with the “standard story structure,” young students might still need help. Giving a class a 4-part set of guidelines can encourage students to come up with very different stories, even with the same guidelines. Think of problems, issues, or concerns that your students are likely to encounter at their age. Consider how you can invent guidelines that make students work out a story’s details. Take a look at the example below.

Sample of an Unfinished Plot

- Pat did not want to go back. Mom asked, “Do you want me to drive you over?” Pat winced and said…
- The three older teens laughed at Pat and left. Pat stared at the ground, trying to fight off the tears. Hidden behind the lockers, Cass had seen it all. Putting a hand on Pat’s shoulder, Cass said, “Maybe you should….”

![Diagram of Standard Story Structure](image)
• After two rough weeks, Pat calmed down. Cass’s idea was strange, but with practice Pat’s confidence grew. Then on Tuesday afternoon, as Pat hurried out of the building and turned down the sidewalk, there they stood, blocking the way. Pat took a deep breath, reached into the backpack, and pulled out...
• By the time Cass and an adult supervisor came out, they couldn’t believe their eyes. Pat and one of the older teens were talking, while the other two were still trying to figure out how Pat had....

Unconventional Autobiographies and Biographies. Let students personify objects, numbers, or creatures so those “voiceless things come alive and receive life histories. Consider car memoirs, bug biographies, or number monologues such as the example below:

Hi. I’m number 1. No, really. #1. You may think I’m a lonely guy, but multiply me by any number, and we can play cards (1 x 2) or start a baseball game (1 x 9). Subtract me, and I’ll make you even (5 – 1 = 4) or odd (12 – 1 = 11). Take me away from myself, and I’ll get fat (1 – 1 = 0). My prime cousins can only be divided by me (7 ÷ 1 = 7). Or divide any other number by itself, and you’ll still get me (8,931 ÷ 8,931 = 1). Put some zeros and a decimal point in front of me, and I’ll feel insignificant (.000001). Add some zeroes behind me, and you’ll want me in your bank account ($1,000,000.00). My favorite card game is Uno, of course, but I will always join you for a round of Skip-Bo, too. Without me, you can’t make a long-distance call (1 + 815 + 333 + 1454). I come before streets and banks and lead every race to the finish line (1st). I’m a natural-born leader who never, ever, comes in last.

“Subject-Area” assignments that students can turn into books. If you have students write online books, they can include video clips, Mp3 files, etc. Here are some “subject area” possibilities:

- **Geography.** Imagine you’ve just returned from a trip around the world. Write a letter to a friend describing your experiences in some of the countries we’ve studied. Include what you’ve noticed about different cultures. For example: people you met, food you ate, sights you saw.
- **Social Studies.** Interview a parent or a neighbor about his or her job. Make sure to ask questions about how the person prepared to get the job, why s/he was interested in it, what duties are there, what they like and dislike, what kind of future they hope for, what a typical day is like, what is the most unusual or interesting thing that ever happened on the job. Turn it into the story of “A Day in the Life of ____.”
- **Earth Science.** Research information about one of the planets in the solar system. Explain what the conditions are like on that planet—climate, atmosphere, distance from the sun, gravity, other conditions, how living creatures or plants would have to adapt, if at all possible. Create a story that occurs among the beings who inhabit the planet.
- **History.** Interview an older relative or family friend about an important historical event that happened in her lifetime. Find out how the event affected her and others, what she recalls about the event, what kinds of changes the event caused, how the media reported the event. Tell the person’s story from her perspective.
- **Culture.** Look up a well-known festival or event such as the Iditarod (dog sled race in Alaska). Put together a news report about what happens, how people prepare for it, why it happens, its history and background, who participates in it, what you think your TV or radio audience would find most interesting about it.
- **Biology.** Identify an interesting animal or insect you encountered on a recent field trip to a local ecosystem, zoo, or pet store. Write down a dialogue with it—how it explains what characteristics it has, what behaviors, what food it eats, how it reacts to you, how it seems to interact with other creatures, what defenses it seems to have.
- **English Language Arts.** Choose a favorite song that tells a story. Expand the plot, develop and add characters as needed, describe the setting/context, clarify the conflict, develop the theme.

Poetry Chapbooks
Most students actually enjoy writing poems, as long as they’re given guidelines they can follow easily. They often enjoy free verse more than rhyming. Single-author or small-group collections both work well. Here’s a list of types of poems that usually produce surprising and interesting results (Google authors, titles):

- A dialogue or question/answer poem (Yeats, “Crazy Jane”)
- A “multiple points of view” poem (Stevens, “13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird ”)
- A season or weather poem (cummings, “Spring”)
- A photo or painting poem (Williams, “Three Graces”)
- A multiple-metaphors poem (Herbert, “Prayer”)
- A place-based poem (Snyder, “Maverick Bar”)
- A multiple moments or events poem (Loy “Three Moments”)
- An art-object poem (Rilke, “Torso”)
- A revenge poem (Smith, “Black Mountain”)
- An ordinary-object poem (Moore, “Steamroller”)
- A shape poem (Apollinaire, “Heart Crown and Mirror”)

PLUS:
- A poem describing a city/neighborhood as a man/ woman
- A lost-possessions or found objects poem
- A retrieved-memory poem
- A poem describing a literary character
- A collected-sounds poem
- A speed-up, slow down poem
- An “I used to be… but now am” poem
- A poem written from an animal’s point of view

10 questions for workshopping poems:
- Is the language not specific enough anywhere?
- Any unnecessary language (especially adverbs, adjectives)?
- Do lines end in strong words (nouns, verbs)?
- Surprising or interesting breaks between lines?
- Are the verbs vivid, the nouns concrete?
- Where does the poem sound most pleasing, interesting? Any distracting sounds?
- Why does the poem have the number of stanzas it has? The shape it has?
- Effective uses of repetition/ contradiction? Any ineffective uses?
- Any confusing parts? How could they be made clearer?
- Does the title of the poem prepare readers for what follows?

**Cast of Characters Project.** Choose a poem, a movie, a news story, a historical event, or any other narrative. Identify “unidentified characters” who would also have been involved and affected by the narrative. For example, read Gwendolyn Brooks’ well-known poem, “The Pool Players: Seven at the Golden Shovel,” below. What are some questions you could ask about this poem? Look at the portraits on pp. 4-5 and pick out 3-4 who could be among seven at the Golden Shovel. Why?

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Now identify someone from the list of portraits on pp. 4-5. Maybe the character you pick is one of the seven in Brooks’ poem, or maybe the character is related to one of them in some way. Please: no vampires, werewolves, zombies, or other supernatural creatures!

1. What is the character’s name and age?
2. Describe the town, city, or neighborhood this character lives in.
3. List 8-10 words that describe this character’s positive and negative traits.
4. List three other people that this character knows among the portraits below—and briefly describe the nature of that relationship, e.g., friend, sibling, neighbor, teacher, boss, girlfriend, aunt, frenemy, parent, grandfather….

5. How much education does your character have, and where did s/he get it?

6. What are three interests your character has?

7. Your character has one secret s/he never shares with anyone. What is it?

8. How do other people in the collection of portraits generally regard your character? Why?

9. Describe one serious mistake your character has made in her/his life.

10. What are your character’s three most desired aims in life—and how successfully has or will s/he achieve(d) them?

11. What kinds of movies, books, TV shows does your character like?

12. What are the two most happy memories your character has?

13. Briefly recount a disturbing experience your character has had (it might involve one of the other characters your classmates are working on)

14. Outline a typical day in the life of your character.

15. What does your character have to say about any of the seven pool players?

16. Recount an encounter or incident your character has had with one of the seven.

17. Write a dialogue that would take place between your character and 1-2 others about one of the seven.
A final thought: Check the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, grades 6-12, to see how many standards these activities could satisfy.