The NFO Literacy Framework

These Five Things, All Year Long

DAVE STUART JR.

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A Note to the Reader

I'll say a few practical things here before I let you dive into this book.

First, this ebook contains clickable links. If you print it off, those links stop being clickable. That's worth stating.

Second, feel free to distribute this to whomever you'd like. It is free and made for sharing. Please attribute anything you borrow to me, or to the folks I've cited throughout, as appropriate.

Third, the next traditionally published book I write will be this one, but much better, smarter, and more comprehensive. To join the list of folks eager to hear about updates around that book specifically, click here (or type this into your browser: davestuartjr.com/nfo-book-list)

Finally, when I'm not being a husband, dad, or teacher, I'm often traveling around the country leading professional development workshops on the material in this ebook. The Non-Freaked Out (NFO) Framework for literacy instruction across the content areas has proven effective at helping secondary teachers see how the passion that drew them into teaching lines up with a simple, smart, literacy-infused approach to content mastery. It seems especially good at producing buy-in -- not through coercion or manipulation, either. I'm good at helping folks realize that we're all on the same team. Head to davestuartjr.com/literacy-workshop to learn more, or email me at dave@davestuartjr.com to inquire about rates and dates.

Happy reading to you.

-Dave

Introduction:
3,500 Teachers Can't Be Wrong

I think that there are thousands of teachers, coaches, and administrators who are dying to be told, "If you and your students are working on this **handful** of things, repeatedly and with increasing skill, throughout the school year as you move through your curriculum, you're okay."

Those last words, especially, are important: "You're okay." Not in the sense of "average" or "mediocre"; I'm talking about "You don't need to feel every day like you're not doing a good enough job."

The legacy of accountability and the over-sciencing of teaching

When people subscribe to my free newsletter, I ask them to complete a simple survey (it's literally three questions long, and only one of the questions is open-ended). At the time of this writing, over 3,500 educators have answered, and they've literally **written more words than were contained in my first book** — 58,531, to be exact (see Fig. 1).

3,500 educators is not a lot when compared to the total number of educators in the USA, which stands at approximately 3.5 million; my survey represents only about .1% of them. And yet, there's enough information to see some clear trends:

- **Educators are highly stressed and highly pressured.** It is one thing to read Gallup poll data finding that 57 percent of educators are

Do me a favor?

Look for an email in your inbox called "RESPONSE REQUIRED: Confirm your request for resources and updates from Teaching the Core." (Sorry about the all caps part.)

In the meantime, would you help me out and tell me a bit about yourself? This information helps me make Teaching the Core more relevant to it's readers.

* Required

Email address *
What's the email you signed up with?

What's your perspective? *
○ K-5 Teacher
○ 6-12 Teacher
○ Administrator
○ Literacy or Instructional Coach
○ Other

What's the most frustrating thing about your job?
This answer will help me write more helpful posts.
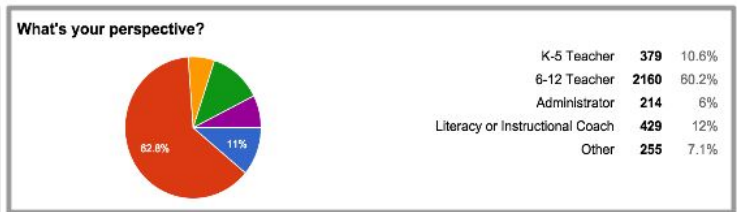
Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

What's your perspective?

K-5 Teacher	379	10.6%
6-12 Teacher	2160	60.2%
Administrator	214	6%
Literacy or Instructional Coach	429	12%
Other	255	7.1%

Fig. 1

Clockwise from upper left: The survey new subscribers are asked (not required) to complete—notice the only extended response question, "What's the most frustrating thing about your job?"; percentages of respondents by role; the amount of pages created when I copied and pasted the extended responses into a blank Word document (total word count = 58,000+); the survey summary screen, with total number of respondents at 3,588.
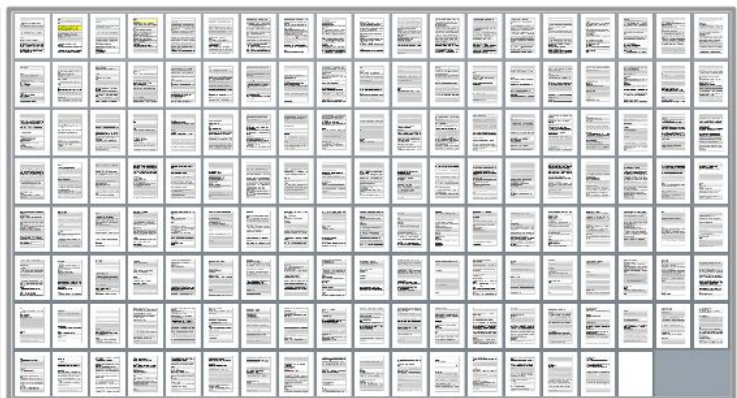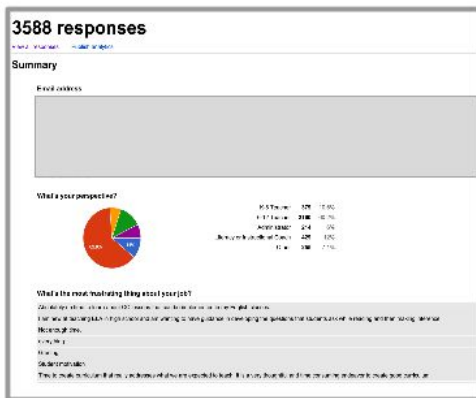
"not engaged" in their work[1]; it is another to read an earnest human being pouring out a paragraph of stress and pressure and impossibility. Optimal amounts of pressure do help increase human performance (e.g., I produce more writing when I'm on a deadline than when I'm not), but I don't know of many teachers who work within anything approaching

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[1] E. D. Hirsh has written and thought extensively on this topic — an apt critique of the Common Core's under-emphasis of content knowledge can be found here: "First, Do No Harm." Kelly Gallagher's article of the week was born from a desire to increase his students' background knowledge and thereby increase their ability to read real-life texts — the full story is found in his best-selling *Readicide*. Also, I'm currently reading Laura Robb's *Vocabulary Is Comprehension*, which provides both a rationale for intentional knowledge-building across the content areas and a practical framework and set of lessons for doing just that. Finally, it's worth saying that the Common Core literacy standards *did* cite knowledge-building as a core skill of college- and career-readiness, both within several standards and in one of the introductory pages of the standards. I summarize the seven things the Common Core asserts that college- and career-ready people can do here; see #2.

"optimal amounts of pressure."

- **Much of that stress is from insane expectations.** Teachers feel that they are expected to solve all of society's problems, every kid at a time. All of their students are to be well-fed, on grade level, and flourishing by March, no matter what. If the teacher isn't reaching a student, then she must not be using the latest strategy or technique correctly; it's her fault.

- **Much of that stress is avoidable.** I think there are very few folks in education who operate out of ill motives; the majority of us teachers, administrators, and coaches live in a perpetual Survival Mode that leads to ill-thought decisions, data for data's sake, hours studying evaluation rubrics, and "Let's learn 1,000 strategies this year" approaches to PD. We have no sight of [Everest](#); we've given it up long ago, trusting, instead, that data and technique and bureaucracy will somehow take us to the mountaintop.

But here's the good news; this is my point: it is still possible for teachers, teams, and whole schools and districts to stand firmly on the timeless truth that humans cannot do all things with excellence, and that it is therefore wise to focus on a few things.

That is essentially what all of my work around literacy instruction is about. I think every teacher should be told, "If you and your students are working on this **handful** of things, repeatedly and with increasing skill, throughout the school year as you move through your curriculum, you're okay."

That's where the "non-freaked out" framework comes in (see Fig. 2).

A NON-FREAKED OUT APPROACH TO LITERACY INSTRUCTION ACROSS THE CONTENT AREAS

GO BIG ON ARGUMENT

READ PURPOSEFULLY & OFTEN

WRITE PURPOSEFULLY & OFTEN
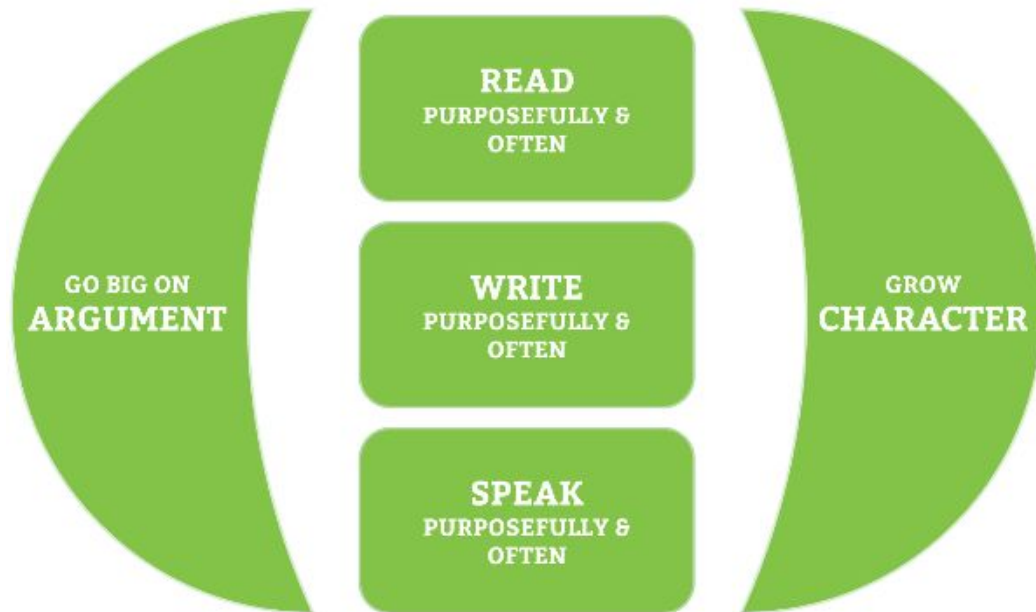
SPEAK PURPOSEFULLY & OFTEN

GROW CHARACTER

Fig. 2 These Five Things, All Year Long

It is my humble, evidence-informed opinion that educators who teach their content through an abundance of opportunities to think, read, write, speak, and develop into resilient, purposeful, responsible people are doing an excellent job. Teachers should be commended, not ashamed, when they choose to focus wisely. I may be updating some of this framework's language in the year to come (stay tuned), but it will still largely boil down to these five elements.

The life and times of the "non-freaked out" framework for literacy instruction across the content areas

In March of 2013, I was coming to the close of my first year of blogging. (If you were around then, you'll recall that my first year was an extended study of and meditation on the Common Core literacy standards; that first year's thinking can be found, in polished form, in my first book, *A Non-Freaked Out Guide to Teaching the Common Core: Using the 32 Anchor Standards to Develop College- and Career-Ready Students*.)

While the 32 anchor standards were helpful to me, there were still too many of them — far too many skills for my students and I to master through a standard-by-standard approach. We could probably "hit" them all, but we'd get excellent at none of them. Problematically, the CCSS didn't clearly prioritize itself — it didn't have the "Hey, if all hell breaks loose, just work toward these five things, again and again, as you go through your curriculum all year."

And so that March, I put forth some rough draft thinking that I called the "non-freaked out approach to the Common Core." My intention was to simplify quality literacy instructional habits to the point where I could tell myself, "Okay Dave, in this week's lessons, if you can just make sure that you and the kids worked on this handful of skills, you done good, kid."

That approach eventually became a five-part framework. A brief timeline:

- March 2013: My initial post hardly mentioned writing (fail — I told you

it was rough draft thinking); a reader helped me add that with "Write
Like Crazy."

- 2013-2014 School Year: Interactions with students, readers, publishers,
  and workshop participants helped me to simplify and clarify the
  framework and begin creating the graphic element.
- June 2014: I put forth a version of the framework that included an
  additional "research" element, which I ultimately abandoned in favor of
  simplicity.
- August 2014: I published the version of the framework that I've been
  using to this day (see Fig. 2), both as a teacher and in the workshops and
  keynotes I give around the country.

Every iteration was aimed at something simple and powerful. I wanted it to
tell teachers what they're dying to be told: that this work hasn't lost its
nobility; that simple wisdom trumps gigs of data; that there's a way to be okay
again.

And the framework started to do that for me. I found that, if I was helping my
students become better at thinking (argument), reading, writing, speaking,
and life (growing character) — **just five things** — as we studied the middle
ages in World History or read *Fahrenheit 451* in English 9, I was okay. I was
hitting not just the most important standards from any list; I was hitting life's
standards. And every day, rather than shoving down a stomach-full of anxiety,
I was guiding my students on a trek toward Everest, rather than a test. I was
remaining true to my calling.

In short, it became increasingly easy for my readers and I to be able to fight

the stress demons; we started being able to tell ourselves, "Hey, you're doing the right work."

"You're okay."

An Overview of the Non-Freaked Out Framework for Literacy Instruction

With the school year started, it's time to settle into our work for the year. As I said in the intro, that work needs to be as focused as humanly possible because far too many of us are stressed to level that decimates our productivity and effectiveness.

The non-freaked out (NFO) framework for literacy instruction across the content areas (see Fig. 1) is my attempt to create a manageable list of instructional habits that, as we work through our course content and curricula, can be

THE NON-FREAKED OUT FRAMEWORK FOR LITERACY INSTRUCTION ACROSS THE CONTENT AREAS

GO BIG ON ARGUMENT

READ PURPOSEFULLY & OFTEN

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SPEAK PURPOSEFULLY & OFTEN

GROW CHARACTER

Figure 1

used to focus our efforts. I want teachers across the content areas to be able to rest assured that a "smarter not harder" approach to teacher literacy instruction and student literacy practice can both strengthen content knowledge and increase the long-term impact of the disciplines.

In my own instruction, I use the framework to make both on-the-fly and planned instructional decisions. If, at the end of the year, my students are better 1) thinkers, 2) readers, 3) writers, 4) speakers, and 5) people as a result of my ninth grade world history and English courses, then I feel that I have done my job. If I see an opportunity mid-lesson that may help my students grow in one or more of the above areas, I tend to take it. When planning units, I wonder: how can my students and I do more work toward these five things? I believe that work in these five areas makes us better at school and at life, both now and twenty years from now.

In the sections that follow, I will work through each element of the framework, explaining its rationale and some illustrative examples as we move along. If at any time you have questions, feel free to ask me a question on Twitter: @davestuartjr.

Four notes before we set out

1. **Content knowledge matters.** Kids need to know stuff; they need to know how one comes to know stuff.[2] So, do not think of this framework as a substitute for solid, content-rich curricula in social studies and science and career/technical subjects and English language arts; *do* think of it as a simple, focused pathway for working through that curricula in a richer, stronger manner.[3]

2. **The side pieces transcend any single activity or lesson.** I want to give my students dozens of shots at strengthening as readers, writers, and speakers during their time in my classroom, but I want them to do

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[2] E. D. Hirsh has written and thought extensively on this topic — an apt critique of the Common Core's under-emphasis of content knowledge can be found here: "First, Do No Harm." Kelly Gallagher's article of the week was born from a desire to increase his students' background knowledge and thereby increase their ability to read real-life texts — the full story is found in his best-selling Readicide. Also, I'm currently reading Laura Robb's Vocabulary Is Comprehension, which provides both a rationale for intentional knowledge-building across the content areas and a practical framework and set of lessons for doing just that. Finally, it's worth saying that the Common Core literacy standards did cite knowledge-building as a core skill of college- and career-readiness, both within several standards and in one of the introductory pages of the standards. I summarize the seven things the Common Core asserts that college- and career-ready people can do here; see #2.

[3] I toyed with including a "knowledge building" piece into the framework design, but opted against it in favor of simplicity. Yet even as I write this, I am ambivalent about that choice because, in episodes of botched Common Core implementation around the USA, whole fields of knowledge have been sidelined for the sake of skill development exercises. Social studies has become close reading class; science is writer's workshop. Knowing things is inseparable from being able to think, read, write, speak, and become people who perform and live better; therefore, helping students build knowledge is a central goal of my English and history classes. Even if computers are someday meshed with our brains, nothing will replace the agility that knowing things gives to a literate person.

something more than gain skill at argument and character. I want them to see the centrality of argument and character to schooling, to relationships, to flourishing; I want them to experience the joy of these things, to develop a love and respect and familiarity with them. That's why argument and character get those outside, half-moon-esque edge shapes.[4]

3. **This is rough draft thinking.** You are encouraged to play, push, tweak, experiment. That's what I do; you should, too.

4. **I give all-day workshops on this material.** The sections that follow will give you enough information to put on a workshop very similar to the one I will give if you bring me out to your school; I encourage you to use this work, with attribution, however it may best help you, your staff, and your students. But then again, if you're located someplace warm, wouldn't it be better just to bring me out to your school? Especially during – oh, I don't know – the inhumanly cold period of January-February-March-in-Michigan?

Let's dive into the framework's five elements, moving left to right.

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[4] Reader Justin Overacker was the first person to describe the NFO Framework as a sideways "sammich," which really is what it looks like. However, for the sake of not repeatedly referring to the "buns" of the framework, I've opted against using that comparison.

I. Go Big on Argument

The centrality of argument to clear and reliable thought

The kind of argument I'm talking about is beautiful. It is deep, critical, collaborative cognition. I pray all my students – and all humans, really — become adept at it because it makes us better people.

If any of that seems strong to you, it's likely because you and I carry different definitions of "argument" in our head. Richard Fulkerson puts my conception well in *Teaching the Argument in Writing*:

> The goal [of argument] is **not victory but a good decision**, one in which all arguers are at risk of needing to alter their views, one in which **a participant takes seriously and fairly the views different from his or her own**.

In other words, argument allows us to:

- make better decisions and
- practice virtues like open-mindedness ("takes seriously"), fairness, and humility ("at risk of needing to alter their views").

Jerry Graff (author of *Clueless in Academe* and co-author of *They Say, I Say*) and Mike Schmoker (author of *Focus*) give us another valuable angle on argument; they describe it as

> *the ability to analyze and assess facts and evidence, support our*

solutions, and defend our interpretations and recommendations with clarity and precision — in every subject area.[5]

Does argument, then, not sound awfully similar to *critical thinking*? Yet to me, it's a superior word, namely because critical thinking has suffered a death-by-linguistic-extension (AKA buzzwordification) similar to close reading.[6]

In my own classroom, I teach only four parts of argument. This is perhaps a gross over-simplification; forgive a fellow his vices, please (see Fig. 2).

In class, we cultivate a familiarity with these argumentative building blocks through activities like reading for argument, writing arguments, and engaging in pop-up debates.[7]

4 basic building blocks of argument

1 **claims** W.CCR.1 -- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid **reasoning** and relevant and sufficient **evidence**. 3

2

4

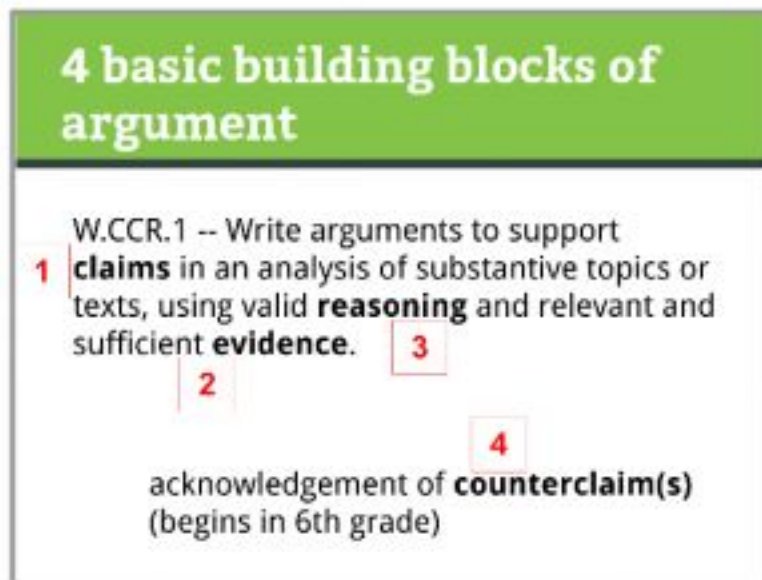acknowledgement of **counterclaim(s)** (begins in 6th grade)

Figure 2: The Four Argumentative Building Blocks

One's **claim** ought to be supported with **evidence**, and that evidence ought to be linked back to one's claim with **reasoning**. Meanwhile, an arguer ought to kindly and proactively address potential **counter-claims**.

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[5] Graff & Schmoker, "More Argument, Fewer Standards" — published in EdWeek but freely available on Mr. Schmoker's website here.
[6] Thank you to Dr. Graff for first pointing this out to me during a visit we shared in Chicago.
[7] I've written about argument-building efforts in my classroom in the following articles:
- Going a Bit Deeper with the They Say, I Say Two-Paragraph Template

A classroom example of how argument can be woven into reading, writing, and speaking

As I said in the initial section, both argument and character – the two elements on the edges of the NFO framework – are more than an activity; they are ways of being, lenses through which to view the world and grow within it.

In the following video example, you'll see an example of how argument might be woven throughout a lesson. There's nothing ground-breaking here, and I'm in no way proposing that this is the only way to do it.

In the video,

- Students are **reading** a visual text (Picasso's *Guernica*),
- They're **writing** in preparation for an argumentative discussion, and
- They are **speaking** about what they've read and written in the debate.

Here it is (click here for video, or type www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKoLIRZeeGQ into your browser).

Several things to notice

- The most compelling speakers refer to readings beyond the painting.
- Simply sitting and listening to this pop-up discuss provides me with rich

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- Go Big on Argument
- Going Big on Argument with Article of the Week
- 8 Reasons I Embrace Arguments in my Classroom
- 4 Ways to Screw Up (and Fix) In-Class Arguments
- 5 Ways to Make Rigorous Arguments Fun

formative data. I know some academic vocabulary terms that deserve reviewing (suffrage; impressionism), and I see potential next mini-lessons on speaking (e.g., organizing one's speech with a clear beginning, middle, and end; avoiding distracting fillers such as "like")

- My students mock me (the kid with the coffee mug – *my* coffee mug – is totally mocking me)
- Argument isn't antagonism – when it's at its best, it's collaboration.

Moving forward

One of the benefits of the NFO framework is that it gives me five sandboxes within which to play as a teacher-learner. There are a million directions in which we can expend our energies as teachers, but that is a hopeless pursuit if our aim is to maximize the positive impact of our careers.

Keep in mind that I've only been pursuing an argument-rich classroom for three years now – and, in that time, I've operated with a heavy bias toward simplicity. This is fairly obvious in the above video. While I hope I won't lose that bias any time soon, I do see some of its drawbacks – for example, too many of my students still end the year deficient in argumentative skill – and so here are some avenues I'll be exploring for ways to improve my teaching game this school year.

You'll notice that some of these are very closely linked with argument, and others veer away a bit. This is because argument is, at its core, just solid, clear thinking – and all of the avenues below are ways in which I'm considering how to make my students and I better thinkers.

Jennifer Fletcher and teaching rhetoric

Ever since hearing of Jennifer Fletcher's *Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response* from a Carol Jago talk at NCTE14, I've been taken with Fletcher's book and working slowly through it. (It is a bottle of Bulleit bourbon, and you don't go chugging that stuff if you've any sense; it merits an analytic reading.)

So far, Fletcher's key contribution to my thinking around argument is the way she frames rhetoric in relation to argument:

From *Teaching Arguments*:

> *Rhetoric isn't just an app that enhances instruction in argumentation; rhetoric is the operating system. As a matter of fact, the study of how to read and write arguments comes to us from the rhetorical tradition.... Rhetoric is larger than argument. If you prefer a nontech metaphor, you might think of rhetoric as the Swiss Army knife of critical communication, of which argument comprises several blades.*

To define rhetoric, I like Andrea Lunsford's[8] simple definition: **the art, practice, and study of human communication.** This is, indeed, something I need to study further this year in my work with students — how do I help students think through occasion, audience, and purpose? How do I equip them with the interpretive tools of logos (what the text says; commonly simplified as "logic"), ethos (the author; commonly simplified as "character"), and pathos (the audience; commonly simplified as "emotion")?[9] I am

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[8] Lunsford is the author of the popular *Everything's an Argument*.
[9] Here I am making use of Jennifer Fletcher's explanations of logos, ethos, and pathos on pp. 139-140 of *Teaching Arguments*.

genuinely wondering these things; welcome to the edge of my thinking.

Jim Burke and Barry Gilmore's *Academic Moves*

Analyze. Develop. Evaluate. Integrate. Summarize.

These are some of the 15 thinking verbs that comprise Burke and Gilmore's *Academic Moves for College and Career Readiness*. While I did a fair amount of grappling with words like these when writing my book on the CCSS anchor standards, reading Burke and Gilmore has been like having wiser friends remind me that these words belong as an intentional part of my instruction.

I do ask my students to engage in many of these thinking tasks, but I'm not great at teaching them *how* to do these things. The two authors of this book have inspired me to play around with thinking skill instruction using their resources.

Dr. David Conley's Key Cognitive Strategies

Finally, my work with argument needs to start being more directly informed by a model for college- and career-readiness that has captured my respect for a couple of years now: Dr. David Conley's Four Keys (see Fig. 3).
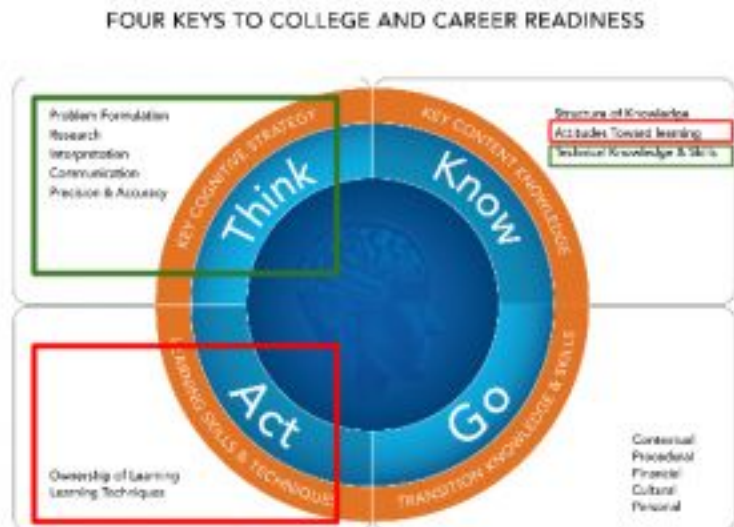

FOUR KEYS TO COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Figure 3: Conley's "Four Keys"
Dr. Conley's work resonates with me because of his efforts to build a simple, robust framework. In relation to my NFO framework, those elements marked with green apply to or extend **Go Big on Argument**, whereas those elements marked with red apply to or extend **Grow Character**.

Dr. Conley has been writing and researching career- and college-readiness decades longer than CCR has been a buzzword[10], and since CCR is a critical component of the [flourishing life](#) I hope my classroom helps students work toward, expect to hear more about Conley's Four Keys in my future work.

You know me: when in doubt, aim for the simplest path; when stressed, do what you know helps. This year will have periods where I'll default to teaching argument as best I can and trusting the power of argument to generate growth in an array of thinking skills. Yet at the same time, I hope to model for you the journey of building upon our areas of instructional focus with increasing clarity, year after year.

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[10] I've read 2 of his 3 major books. His book *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready* is largely responsible for my school's current efforts to increase our Advanced Placement offerings; there were many teachers in my building who believed in the power of AP to promote the long-term flourishing of students, but Conley's expertise in this area helped convince key stakeholders to make the push. His book *Getting Ready for College, Careers, and the Common Core: What Every Educator Needs to Know* is where I first came across the Four Keys framework. And finally, though I haven't yet read *College and Career Ready: Helping All Students Succeed Beyond High School*, it's not for lack of wanting to. A quick look at the table of contents of that book suggests that, in it, Conley lays out the Four Keys for the first time (at least in book form), and I'm fascinated to read that initial formulation.

II. Read purposefully and often

Whether you're in a Common Core state or a state that's renamed the Common Core to something else or a state that's never adopted them or a country far, far away, there's one section of the CCSS that merit a reading by all educators: "[Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards](#)." I'll be the first to say that Appendix A isn't exactly "grab a cold one and sit on the back porch" reading, yet it has taught me a lot: the Three Tiers of vocabulary words; the recursive nature of learning grammar and mechanics[11]; the "special place" of argument; and the Story of Two Arrows (see Fig. 4).

Unless students possess some wicked strong character strengths (especially, in this case, persistence and grit), graduating from high school without the ability to read postsecondary texts places them at a huge disadvantage; in the words of the Appendix, "a high school graduate who is a poor reader is a postsecondary student who must struggle mightily to succeed" (p. 3). Poor skills in any area
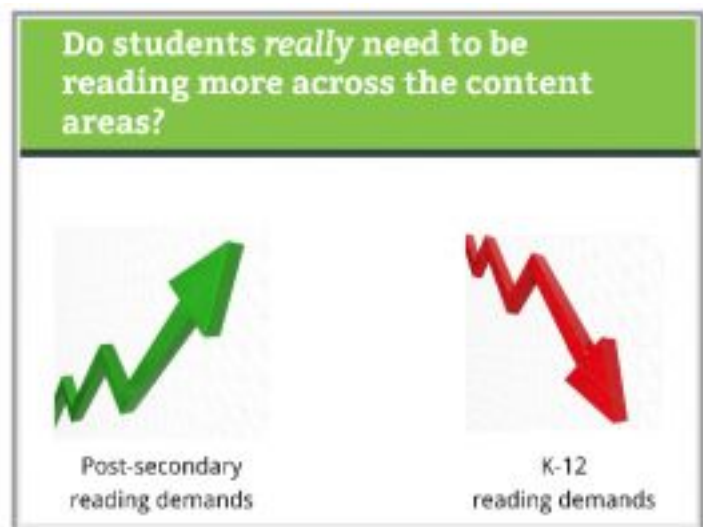

Figure 4: The Story of Two Arrows
Appendix A of the Common Core literacy standards explains how, during the past fifty years, reading demands after high school have either increased or remained constant, whereas those prior to graduation have decreased. The result? About half of students in the US score at or above college- and career-readiness on end-of-high-school reading benchmark tests.

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[11] One more reason why Doug Stark's *Mechanics Instruction that Sticks: Using Simple Warm-Ups to Improve Student Writing* is awesome!

certainly don't help the postsecondary student, but deficiencies in reading are, according to a 2004 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, most damaging: college freshmen who required a remedial reading course had a 30 percent chance of graduating, whereas those who did not require such a course had a 69 percent graduation rate.[12]

Here is where some of our shared labor must be dedicated because it is a problem larger than any of us and it takes a serious toll on long-term human flourishing. Our question is this: How do we equip our students with a robust, viable literacy?

My tack toward doing this, in the area of reading, at least, is to make ways for my students to read 1) a large **volume** of texts with 2) a goodly number of those texts being appropriately **complex** for the ninth grade.[13] Also, they must 3) do this work **independently**. Let's treat each bolded word in turn.

Addressing volume

To allow my students to read as many texts as possible, I must first take stock of my curricula with a simple question: How many texts does my course require?

In English 9, my district's list may look like this:

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[12] The NCES report, "The Condition of Education," can be found here. In regards to my use of the word "deficiencies," which I know some readers will find harsh: the word deficiency means "a lack or shortage," and it is a bizarre world indeed where we cannot refer to the under-development of reading skills as a deficiency. I teach young adults who are starving for straight talk; they want the truth with love. The truth is that many of my students, and their counterparts around the USA, possess skill deficiencies that will make their lives much more challenging than they ought to be. That is something I aim to help them remedy every day in my classroom.

[13] By "appropriate for ninth grade," I mean at a level of complexity that will increase over the final years of high school and culminate at a 12th grade complexity level similar to the levels of complexity found in first year college courses or career settings.

- 10 choice reading books (5 per semester)

- 20 articles

- 5 whole class extended works

  ○ *Fahrenheit 451*

  ○ *Romeo and Juliet*

  ○ *Animal Farm*

  ○ *A Separate Peace*

  ○ *The Odyssey* (excerpts)

- 3 short stories

- 3 poems

In World History:

- ~36 Articles of the Week[14]

- 24 primary source documents

- 50 textbook pages

- 1 novel (*All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Things Fall Apart*)

It is senseless to hold conversations in our schools about whose job it is to get kids to read more if we don't first know how much they are currently reading

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[14] Some of my most popular articles and resources pertain to Kelly Gallagher's article of the week assignment. Here is my article of the week page, which I update regularly, and below you'll find some articles I've written about the assignment:

- There and Back Again: My Journey with Kelly Gallagher's Article of the Week Assignment

- Scaffolds for Dominating the Article of the Week

- Why I Use the Article of the Week in My Electives Classes this one is by friend and colleague Heidi Bonnema)

- Going Big on Argument with the Article of the Week

in each of our classes. This is the kind of simple quantification work that Mike Schmoker taught me to do through his *Focus: Elevating the Essentials*. The goal is to provide access to opportunity for all students. All students should have the opportunity to be required (yes) to read a great number of texts across the content areas. It is often through reading a great number of texts that we, their content area teachers, became enamored of our disciplines. In English 9, I want my students to experience authors *they* choose and authors my *district* chooses and authors *I* choose. I want them to taste the differences between a Shakespearean tragedy and a poem and an article from the *Times*. In World History, I want my students to imbibe the voices of Mansa Musa and Michelangelo and contemporary journalists and ancient philosophers.

But these texts are complex — many of them to a far greater degree than most of my students can handle autonomously.

Addressing complexity

The problem with complex texts is that so many of my students don't read at the ninth grade level; as a result, I need to scaffold. When approaching scaffolding tasks, I have two things in mind:

- **It is possible to over-scaffold.** If it takes me 25 minutes to prepare students for reading a short complex text, I have likely over-taught (and thereby butchered) the reading. What curiosity-fueled motivation my students did possess at the lesson's start has long sputtered out.
- **The shortest route to an objective is the best one,** assuming both routes are nearly equal in their effectiveness, **because I want my kids**

to have access to lots of different texts over the course of the school year.

Therefore, with every complex text, I'm aiming for the sweet spot of instructional efficiency. I want to give just enough scaffolding to get my students actually reading the text; I believe in my kids' ability and desire to do this hard work.

I know of no simpler framework for scaffolding a reading than Mike Schmoker's authentic, redundant literacy template (see Fig. 5; graphic "bounce pass" originally created by Erica Beaton).

I'll briefly go through each of these.

- **Simple hook:** The goal here is schema activation and creating student interest. I've summarized the popular (and simple) "Take a Stand" strategy for doing this here.

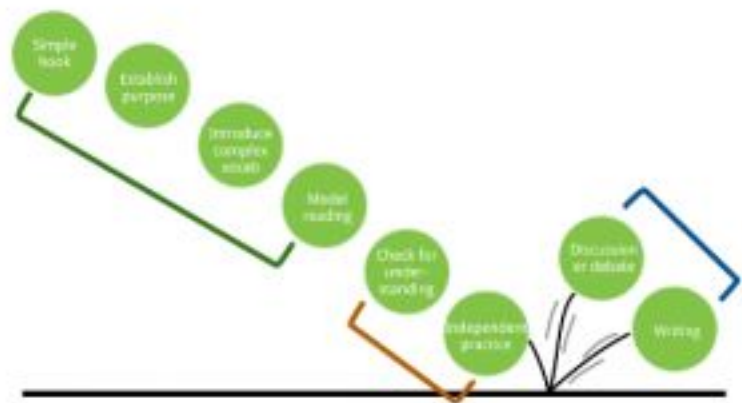**Figure 5: Mike Schmoker's "authentic, redundant literacy template"**

(Green) Before reading, teacher/students work through some or all of these.
(Orange) During reading, teacher/students work through these; teacher circulates and confers with students.
(Blue) After reading, students and teacher work through some or all of these modes.

- **Establish purpose:** Think short-term (e.g., "We're reading this primary source

document today to help us prepare for our debate on whether Genghis Khan was a positive force in world history") and long-term (e.g., "We're also reading this because it's complex and will require much of us, so it's one more chance to hone the skills we will use all our lives to achieve our goals and help others").[15]

- **Introduce complex vocab:** I aim at no more than ten words here; my goal is the efficient introduction of the words most likely to affect my students' comprehension of as much of the text as possible.

- **Model reading:** I read/think-aloud 1-2 paragraphs of the text. I'm particularly interested here in showing students how I keep my purpose in mind when reading; I've treated that at length with my article "Purposeful Annotation: A Close Reading Strategy that Makes Sense to My Students."

- **Check for understanding:** I most normally do this by circulating throughout the room looking for signs of "I get it" (engaged; moving through text; annotating purposefully) and "I'm struggling" (asleep; stuck on one paragraph; doodling; highlighting the entire passage).

- **Discussion or debate:** You know me; I love the pop-up method, which can be applied to both discussions and debates. Other options here could be Socratic Seminars or Philosophical Chairs.[16]

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[15] On the note of working hard now to help others in the future, I have realized in the past few weeks that I am woefully ignorant of all the great research that has been done around purpose. High on my reading list are any studies done by Dave Yeager (see my recent write-up of one of his studies; also, here's his "Boring but Important: A Self-Transcendent Purpose for Learning Fosters Academic Self-Regulation") and Dr. William Damon's work, especially the study on adolescent purpose that he unpacks in *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life*.

[16] I am not experienced with using these methods, but they are frequently cited by participants in my workshops around the USA.

- **Writing:** As I'll discuss later, I'm a big fan of the one-paragraph composition and [the two-paragraph They Say, I Say composition](#) (which can closely hold to the Graff/Birkenstein template or not).

Schmoker's framework isn't a [silver bullet](#), obviously, but it sure as heck is a sword in our quest to fight the dragon of scaffolding complex texts for our kids without over-teaching. It's also versatile enough to be used across the content areas.

Addressing independence

Schmoker's framework, like all instructional frameworks, I'm guessing, does not allow students to engage with complex texts 100 percent on their own — it's more like 80-90 percent independence, depending on how much instructional time you put into the pre-reading work and how much conferring you do with individuals or small groups during the reading time. I am comfortable with those percentages.

The closest my students get to 100% independence is through choice reading in English class; however, I would say that the complexity of that reading is often lacking. This lack is likely due to my own shortcomings as a choice reading teacher, so I will continue to grow there. I am interested, this coming school year, in building a world history classroom library using Donors Choose.

(Over $11,000 has been donated to my classroom through Donors Choose, predominantly from people and organizations who don't know me from Adam; [in this article, I describe how that has happened](#).)

A note on choice reading

In English language arts, an important and popular strategy for increasing the volume of student reading is self-selected, recreational reading, or "choice reading." Kelly Gallagher, in his new book, advocates for an 80 percent student-chosen, 20 percent teacher-chosen mix in the secondary ELA classroom.

I will leave determinations about percentages and numbers to those much more knowledgeable in this field than me,[17] and I will line up beside all the English teachers in the world who believe a central outcome of the ELA classroom ought to be a love for and comfort with all the words one can read and write and speak and hear. I loved reading, growing up. My recreational reading habits helped make me the person I am today. I thank God that I happened to be born to parents who never minded buying me books.

And yet – you sensed it coming, didn't you? – I have to say that we ELA teachers can get awfully ELA-centric sometimes. I was at a conference recently, and one of the keynote speakers proclaimed, to raucous applause, that "all reading is good reading," and that we ought not to "judge" a reader for what she reads, and that the only authentic reading is the reading one chooses. The crowd roared.

I wonder at the long-term effects of a belief system that deems all reading good reading. While candy to the ears, I fear it lacks nutrition for our minds.

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[17] There are three authors with whom I'm most familiar who have written extensively on choice reading; I respect their sharp intellect, their keen passion, and their teacher's hearts: Donalyn Miller, whose *The Book Whisperer* is perfect for upper el and middle school; Penny Kittle, whose *Book Love* explores choice reading in the high school; and Kelly Gallagher, whose aforementioned *In the Best Interest of Students* explores his 80:20 model.

Our question is not, "What kind of reading is good?" Our question is, "How might our students' long-term flourishing best be promoted?" A rich reading life has certainly been shown to correlate to long-term flourishing outcomes – I cannot argue with this – we must remember that it is no guarantee. How many of us have taught a student who reads a handful of books per week but rarely turns assignments in on time? Which of your college courses provided you with extensive options for what you would read?

All I'm saying is that we as ELA teachers must think hard about long-term flourishing. We must accept that, throughout all of human history, there has been a Law of Unintended Consequences in operation, and we must ask ourselves what unintended consequences may come of us telling our students that reading Buzzfeed articles is "good" and reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is "good," too.

Where might this take us? I'm merely asking the question.

There's no question: the ability to read a variety of texts independently and with self-sustained engagement is inseparable from an adaptable, flourishing life.[18]

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[18] For more of my articles on reading, see the following list:
- [Can a Text be Inherently Worth Reading, Even if it Wilts Your Soul?](#)
- [An Obituary for Close Reading](#)
- [Moving Forward with Close Reading](#)
- [Here's What I Know About Reading for Meaning Statements](#)
- [The Anchor Standards in Reading: An Overview](#)
- [What's the Big Deal with Text Complexity?](#)

III. Write purposefully and often

Proficiency at writing is so central to a flourishing life in the 21st century that it is perhaps impossible to over-communicate the tragic nature of its scarcity. In the most recent (2011) national report card on writing skill, only 24 percent of eighth- and twelfth-grade students were **proficient** at writing — and proficient is defined by the NAEP as follows:

> *Students performing at [the Proficient] level have clearly demonstrated **the ability to accomplish the communicative purpose of their writing**.[19]*

In other words, the proficiency bar isn't set at winning a Nobel Prize in literature; we're talking about writing emails to your boss or spouse or friend that communicate as intended.

That 24 percent number is great news for those who possess the ability to write proficiently — they will be the "rockstars" of their generation (as Esther Cepeda puts it) because they are in possession of one of the few real-life "super powers" (as my friend Barrett Brooks says). According to *Writing: A Ticket to Work, or a Ticket Out* (a freely available report), writing is a "threshold skill" that allows for both employment and promotion opportunities; the lack of writing ability costs people jobs and opportunities.[20] Obviously, writing is

- On Common Core Text Complexity, the Triangle of Life, and the Freakout
- A Non-Freaked Out, Focused Approach to the Common Core, Part 2: Complex Texts

[19] National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at Grades 8 and 12, Writing, 2011.
[20] The report summarizes the findings of a survey completed by 64 companies representing around 4 million jobs. The survey was given by The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges and was published by The College Board.

critical for college completion, too — so critical, in fact, that aforementioned college- and career-readiness researcher David Conley has asserted that "[i]f we could institute only one change to make students more college ready, it should be to increase the amount and quality of writing students are expected to produce."[21]

My questions, then, as a world history and English teacher, are:

- How do I increase the volume of writing my students are expected to produce as we go through our curriculum this year?
- How do I increase the quality of writing my students are expected to produce?

To move toward answering those two questions, I think it's useful to review what writing is good for. Along the way, we'll examine three kinds of writing: provisional, readable, and polished.

Writing, first and foremost, can help us learn: Provisional Writing

The number one reason to increase the amount and quality of writing even in non-ELA courses is because writing is an excellent way to learn. As Silver, Dewing, and Perini state in their masterfully concise *The Core Six*, writing "slows down and opens up the thinking process"[22] in ways that reading and

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[21] Conley's article, "The Challenge of College Readiness," appeared in Ed Leadership, April 2007; you can access the full text for free here.

[22] I have benefitted greatly from this author trio's book, as long-time blog readers will know. Their "Write to Learn" strategy informs most of my approach to increasing writing quantity and quality in my courses; their "Reading for Meaning" strategy was the focus of my article, "Here's What I Know about Reading for Meaning Statements."

speaking and listening cannot. When we have several minutes of time to spend quickwriting in response to a question or two, our brains are allowed to focus, generate, create, solve, anticipate, or review. Here are some sample questions I might ask my students to respond to at the start, during the middle, or at the end of a lesson, organized by the type of thinking I want students to do.

Review:

- What did we learn yesterday?
- What was the most important thing we learned yesterday?
- What was the most important idea we discussed during today's lesson?

Generate:

- What does it take to be a horrible leader? What does it take to be a bad leader?
- How could Charlemagne have improved his legacy?
- What strategies do you use when you get stuck as a writer?

Reflect:

- As a class, what did we do well during today's pop-up debate? What could we have done better?
- How have you worked on growing your character this week? Describe a specific example.
- At this point in the semester, describe one thing you are proud of and one thing you want to work on.

These kinds of prompts, and the quickly produced pieces of writing that flow from them, can be accomplished in well less than five minutes; daily practice with these can help students grapple with any content area more effectively, and it need not drive the teacher insane facilitating such regular, provisional writing.

Writing is both uniquely powerful and uniquely tricky: Readable Writing

When comparing the ratio of written versus spoken communication that the average 21st century adult produces in daily life, there is no contest: most of us speak vastly more words each day than we write.[23] Yet writing trumps speaking in one important way: words on a page — be that page digital or paper — live on long after they are created, and they have a greater deal of work to do than spoken words because they do not have body language or gestures or vocal tone to lean on. As a result, it is my guess that far more people can recall a horribly misunderstood email than they can a horribly misunderstood conversation.

As such, it's important that our students have ample opportunity to practice **readable** writing, which I'll let Silver, Dewing, and Perini summarize.

From *The Core Six*:

> *Readable writing, like a classroom essay test or assignment, requires students to clarify their thoughts and develop an organizational*

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[23] It was Erik Palmer who first put it to me this way; his book *Well Spoken* is a true classic; also, it is masterfully brief. He has also written *Teaching the Core Skills of Speaking and Listening*, which is excellent as well.

structure for their ideas. Unlike provisional writing, readable writing is intended for an audience — usually the teacher, who uses it to assess students' depth of understanding and ability to construct solidly reasoned responses.

Whenever we're producing readable writing, then, my goal is to help my students be as readable as possible. Following are some mini-lessons I'll teach throughout the year just before giving a readable writing task; the goal is short and practical instruction toward skills my students either need to learn or review.

Conventions

- Brainstorm a list of errors that might make a serious reader disregard you.
  - E.g., lower-cased first person pronouns (i like apples), missing periods, etc.
- When to capitalize nouns in World History

Organization

- Topic sentences
- Closing sentences
- Transition words

Working with Evidence

- Quotation marks: How to use exact wording from someone else's work.
- How to use a paraphrase of someone else's work.

- In-text citations: Shorthand methods for saying, "I got that from there."
- "In other words": paraphrasing a quotation in a way that more clearly communicates to your audience

This is far from an exhaustive list, and I want to clearly state that these discrete, teachable skills are within the grasp of nearly every student we teach if we'll just simplify our instruction and teach them within the context of work we're doing in class. It's also worth stating that all of the mini-lessons above would just as likely be observed in my World History instruction as they would in my English 9 courses.

Writing is infinitely improvable: Polished Writing

When you're writing something really important — a cover letter for a job you want, a manifesto on your blog, a "We Need to Talk" email to your spouse — it's best to write it a few times. That process of brainstorming, writing, reading, re-writing, re-reading, editing, revising, and so on is the writing process that we use to polish our work and make it as finished as it can be. James Giles, a friend of mine, once said that a piece of writing can only ever be the best it can be before the author runs out of time or steam.

I'll be honest: my students don't do nearly as much work with the full writing process as they should; you'll see this in a moment when I quantify the writing my students do in World History and English 9. Part of this deficit is perhaps born from my own writing process: as a blogger/teacher/dad/husband, my writing process is hasty. I draft as clearly and effectively as I can, I re-read every post at least once, I do a Control+F search for some of my most commons typos (it's/its; you're/your), and I click Publish. There is probably

not a single blog article I write free from clunky phrasings or typos, but if I'm to be the kind of husband and dad and teacher I want to be, on top of being a writer, this accelerated writing process with its attendant failures is a necessary evil.

And I suppose that reveals the other reason for my students not engaging in the full writing process frequently enough — I believe that quantity precedes quality, and therefore my initial objectives these past few years has been having them produce a large volume of writing. For a glimpse at what I think is ideal, let's talk about frequency targets.

Daily, weekly, monthly: frequency targets for each kind of writing

I see Silver, Dewing, & Perini's three kinds of writing as progressive — they give us three phases for growing writing across the content areas (see Fig. 6).

A first goal for any curriculum team or

Figure 6: Three Kinds of Writing & Frequency Targets
On the top, a summary of the "Write to Learn" strategy from *The Core Six*. On the bottom, my targets for frequency (purple) and some examples of types of work (orange).

content area teacher ought to be ensuring that, **every day, students create provisional writing**. This would be work that almost never crosses the teacher's desk; instead, it lives in a writer's notebook or a learning log or a binder, and the students are held accountable to the work as the teacher circulates during quickwrite opportunities.

A second goal, then, is that, **at least once per week, students create readable writing**. Such assignments could be as short as a paragraph (the majority of writing concepts can be taught using the paragraph), and here my goal would be to read and respond to about 25% of the amount of readable work that students produce.[24]

A final goal — and here is where I need to grow — is that, **at least once per month across the content areas, students are producing polished writing**. If I were an administrator, I would allow teams to determine what kind of polished writing is appropriate for their discipline, and I would expect teams to think carefully about how the polishing process makes the most of instructional time. I can't count how many times I've facilitated the writing process in my English language arts courses over the years and struggled to scaffold the time so that all students are engaged with the hard work of making their pieces better. Too often, it seems we're moving too slow for some students and too fast for others. The workshop model solves this problem in ELA settings, but what about the content areas?

It seems wise to spend a year on each of these goals, working from provisional to polished. At the end of the process, students in Dream School District

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[24] Kelly Gallagher is the first person who I heard state, "I want my students to be creating four times the amount of writing I can possibly read." He expands upon this concept in "Moving Beyond the 4×4 Classroom."

would emerge from their content area courses stronger in both content knowledge and the super-power of writing proficiency, having had multiple courses per year where they wrote daily provisional pieces, weekly readable pieces, and monthly polished ones.

Action Step #1: Quantify your curriculum's writing expectations

Wondering where to begin? Similar to reading, the best place to start is with simple counting. How much and what kind of writing are students expected to produce in your classes?

Last year in world history, here's what we did:

- One-page responses to articles of the week = ~36 pages of **readable writing**

- Quickwrites at the start or end of each class period, about 1/2 page each = ~90 pages of **provisional writing**

- On-demand essays at the end of most units: 8 essays, ~3 pages per essays = ~24 pages of **readable writing** (here is a sample essay prompt from our world history curriculum)

- Notes taken on assigned readings = ~100 pages of **provisional writing**

- Primary source lesson responses from Stanford's Read Like a Historian collection: ~20 pages of **readable and provisional writing**

Notice the weakness? Students aren't polishing any of their writing. In the

second bullet point below, you'll see where my head is heading for this year in World History (more on that in Action Step #2).

Last year in English 9, here's what we did:

- Quickwrites at the start or end of each class period, about 1/2 page each = ~90 pages of **provisional writing**
- Personal narratives at the start of each unit, about 3 pages each = ~27 pages of **polished writing** (we typically use these to teach one discrete skill and have students revise for it)
- Grammar and mechanics sentences and paragraphs (more on our grammar and mechanics curriculum [here](#)), about 1 page total per week = ~36 pages of **readable writing**
- Argumentative essays, about 3-5 pages each = 12-20 pages of **polished writing**
- Research essay, about 3-5 pages = 3-5 pages **polished writing**
- Literary analysis essay, about 3-5 pages = 3-5 pages **polished writing**

Expectedly, there's a better balance here, but I can tell you that many of these assignments are more rushed than they should be; I need to get better at deepening the quality of these pieces and increasing the quantity.

Action Step #2: Aim for small wins

This year in world history, I need to jump into the polished writing fray. To make this new effort sustainable, I'll probably have students take one of their essays and work them through the writing process once per quarter.

This school year, I don't have English sections, but if I did, I would be aiming at increasing quantity and quality, particularly of polished pieces. How do we empower students to experience the writing process, taste its benefits, and produce their best work? That question will be on my mind throughout every year that I teach, regardless of which courses I'm assigned.

This section contained a fair amount of information, so I want to emphasize the lowest hanging fruit: we need to increase the volume of writing that our students produce. As Kelly Gallagher puts it in "[Beyond the 4×4 Classroom](#)":

> *The volume of writing is the key ingredient. If I provide good modeling, but my kids do not write much, they will not grow. If I confer with them, but they do not write much, my students will not grow. If I provide a lot of choice, but they do not write much, my students will not grow. Modeling, conferring, and choice are critical to growth, but if my students are not writing a lot, these factors become irrelevant.*

So, across the content areas, we ought to first aim at quantity, and then systematically explore the improvement of quality.

IV. Speak Purposefully and Often

Since speaking is, by far, the most voluminous method with which we communicate on a daily basis, it's ironic that many of our students are taught far more about writing than they are speaking. Even if they are lucky enough to be taught *how* to speak effectively, it is too often in the context of a *single* unit or "the one big speech." As a result, our students do not have the chance to do the volume of deliberately practiced speaking that it takes to gain proficiency.

Clearly, speaking must not remain what Erik Palmer has called "the forgotten language art," relegated not just to the back burner in many schools, but "off the stove entirely."[25]

Toward that end, here's what I aim to accomplish:

1. **Every student** speaks
2. to **1 or more peers**
3. **multiple times per class period**
4. in a professional and academic manner.

Which means that I need to, correspondingly,

1. develop systems for ensuring ever student talks,
2. engage shy students and restrain outspoken ones,
3. prize efficiency over complexity when it comes to speaking and listening activities,

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[25] To get a great taste of Erik's style and mind, watch the brief video on this page.

4. and teach skills in an explicit and organized fashion.

Let's look at each of these in a slightly different order.

Prizing efficiency over complexity, example 1: Think-Pair-Share

Roughly 80 percent of the speaking and listening that my students do is through Frank Lyman's Think-Pair-Share technique (see Fig. 7).

Figure 7: Think-Pair-Share
Harvey "Smokey" Daniels and Nancy Steineke call T-P-S "the most instantaneously transformational structure we can add to our classrooms."

Think-Pair-Share is simple and efficient

Think mode -- students are independently thinking or writing
Pair mode -- students are sharing their responses with partner or small group
Share mode -- teacher is randomly calling on students or students are volunteering answers

Here is Think-Pair-Share in four steps:

1. The teacher or a student poses a question.
2. All students think or write out an answer (this would be provisional writing, most often).
3. Students converse about their answers in pairs.
4. The class listens to answers from several volunteers and several randomly-selected students.

There are certainly management issues that come with Think-Pair-Share — I need to ensure that all students are participating, and I need to create a safe environment where being randomly called upon isn't going to be emotionally

dangerous for kids — but this is the kind of strategy that can be taught by mid-September and used all year-long as a training ground for speaking skills and character strengths like social intelligence and self-control. Additionally, it's a lightning quick formative assessment tool that I can use to measure whether or not students are "getting" whatever it is that we're learning today.

Prizing efficiency over complexity, example 2: The Pop-Up Method

The Pop-Up Method for debate, discussion, or even [toast-making](#) solves a lot of management issues that teachers often have when they try getting all students speaking in front of their peers.

Here is the Pop-Up Method in four steps:

1. The teacher poses a question.
2. Students are given a set amount of time to prepare, largely through regular lessons: sometimes weeks, more often a few days, and sometimes no time at all.
3. Every student must speak at least once, at most X times (usually I set X at 2)
4. To speak, students simply stand up from their seats and start talking. If more than one student stands and speaks at the same time, I model how to yield the floor with civility and respect.

For a class of 36 freshmen last year, a full pop-up debate often took no more than 20 minutes — and that included my habit of re-energizing the debates

with an announcement like "Repeaters may speak for the next three minutes," thus allowing those outspoken students who already spoke their maximum amount of times to speak again. (That's a great way to keep those kids involved in the debate after they've maxed out their speaking.)

Twenty minutes to allow every student to practice speaking in front of a class, rehearse content, and strengthen argumentative thinking skills is twenty minutes well spent in my book. Pop-Up events tend to happen 1-2 times every 2 weeks in both my English 9 and World History courses.

Engaging shy students and restraining outspoken ones

With both Think-Pair-Share and the Pop-Up Method, you'll notice that outspoken students are given some additional chances to talk — I tend to take a few volunteers during Share mode, and I tend to allow a segment of time for "Repeaters" in Pop-Ups — but they are also not given free reign. If you have a class of 30 students and a handful of students are speaking to the class dozens of times, let me tell you something: many students are bored. We need to help our outspoken kids develop the self-control and social intelligence that it takes to *not* be the one always talking.

On the other hand, did you notice how both Think-Pair-Share and the Pop-Up Method scaffold for our shyest kids? Every year, I have at least a few students who are nervous to the point of nausea at the thought of public speaking. In one of my favorite bits of anecdotal evidence on this topic, I interview Rebekah about how she began the year as one of those shy students and ended it wanting to pursue a career in politics. I'm not sure if that's one for the win

column or not, but it's awesome that Rebekah didn't just endure speaking in front of her classmates — she eventually thrived within it. Here's a video of Rebekah and I talking through that (and here's the link to watch it directly on Youtube, just in case the embedded player isn't working):

Here are some keys for helping shy students:[26]

- Spend the first few weeks of school mastering Think-Pair-Share; ensure that every student gets randomly called upon during Share mode at least a few times.

- When preparing for that first Pop-Up Debate, make it an easy win — teaching students to make a claim in response to the question you've posed, and tell them that they need only stand up and make a claim for this initial debate.

- Allow students to read their speaking bits, especially at the beginning of the year.

- Share a story or two of a time when you, their teacher, experienced intense nervousness prior to speaking.

- **Do not mention an alternative** to speaking in front of class. The only time I would make an exception to this would be if a student had an IEP or 504 indicating otherwise. The goal here isn't to mortify students; it's to show them that, quite simply, speaking in front of a group of people does not result in death.

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[26] I go into these at greater length in my article, "Beyond the Fear of Public Speaking: Making the First Pop-Up Debate a Success for All Students."

(By the way: one of the reasons I take on public speaking engagements is because it keeps me in touch with the nervousness my students feel; even speaking to audiences at over 35 events around the USA so far, I'm still nervous each time.)

Using systems to keep track of who talks

Want to know the most basic way to make me better at running? Ensure that I run a certain quantity of miles each week. To do that effectively, you would need to develop a system that allowed you to easily keep track of whether I'd run and how far I ran each day.

Similarly, one of the most basic improvements we can make to our speaking instruction is to ensure that every student speaks at least once. I use two simple systems for this.

System 1: index cards for random selection

I've written elsewhere about my "Simple, Powerful Tweak on the First Day of School Index Card Activity;" I use those cards to cycle through my roster during the Share mode of Think-Pair-Share. While I won't always take volunteers during Share mode (sometimes there just isn't time), I always do the random selection. Why?

Here are two reasons:

- Random-selection helps hold students accountable for quality work during Think and Pair modes.
- Working through that deck ensures that every one of my students

practices speaking to the whole class, roughly once every two days.

System 2: a simple roster on a clipboard

The limitation of the index card method is that I don't have any record of the formative information I'm collecting as I observe each student speaking to the class. It may be that a large group of students are using filler words, but I might miss that trend and not teach toward it while I'm using index cards on the fly.

Unless, that is, I occasionally track student speaking using a simple roster on a clipboard (see Fig. 8).

Figure 8: Keeping Track of Student Speaking
My go-to clipboard sheet has as many classes as I can fit on it (this one has three) and a slot next to each students' name. I'll use this sheet to monitor both number of speeches (for Pop-Up situations) and simple formative notes (e.g., "Voice +," meaning the student was clearly audible; "Poise - Like," meaning the student needs to work on Poise, specifically in his repetitive use of the word "like").

I don't walk around with a clipboard all of the time, but at least once per week I collect some data, reviewing it later to determine what specific skills we need to work on next.

Teaching speaking and listening skills in an explicit and organized fashion

The past few years of working with the NFO framework and reading the work of others has led me to believe that there are just three "buckets" of speaking

skills (see Fig. 9).

The tricky thing with Content: It *is* what you say, not just how you say it — especially in the content areas

There is a brilliant moment during a Pop-Up Debate that we caught on film several years ago. In it, Kris beautifully exemplifies how stellar Organization and Delivery can completely overshadow Content problems. Take a look (and here's the link to watch it directly on Youtube, just in case the embedded player isn't working):

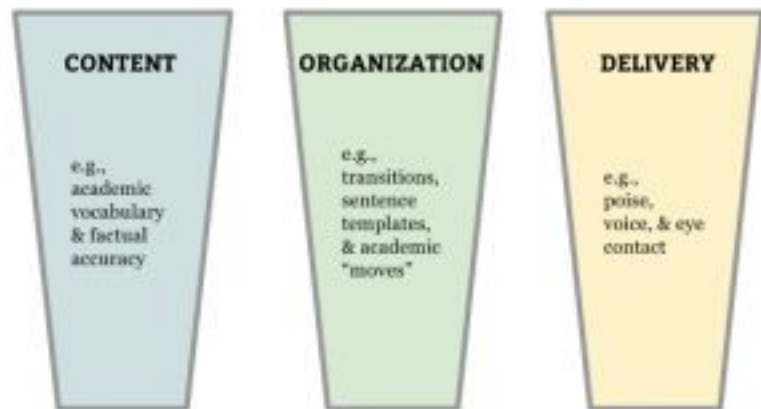**Figure 9: The Three Buckets of Speaking Skills**
When planning speaking instruction, I consider what "bucket" my students need to strengthen. Within Organization, I draw heavily on the work of Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein in *They Say, I Say*. Within Delivery, I completely steal Erik Palmer's brilliant PVLEGS acronym from *Well Spoken*. And when my students become effective with Organization and Delivery, it's time to keep them honest with their Content!

Did you notice how well Kris organized his speech?

- There's a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- In the beginning, there are cues to the audience as to what they're about to hear.
- Kris paraphrases three arguments he's heard so far in the debate, and then proceeds to rebut each one in order.

Kris's Delivery is incredible, too. I'll use Erik Palmer's PVLEGS acronym to

work through Kris' speech.[27]

- **Poise:** He appears calm and confident, albeit with a very minor distracting behavior (pulling down his shirt) and a minor brain lapse (he suggest in his intro that the atomic bomb wasn't dropped on Japan; the rest of his argument makes clear that this is not what he meant to say).

- **Voice:** No audibility issues.

- **Life:** Kris adds a communicative layer to his words using emphasis and an approachable yet authoritative tone.

- **Eye contact:** Pretty good! It's hard to tell on film, but I'm guessing there are students Kris did not connect with (it looks like he looks straight forward or down). Yet Kris certainly isn't merely staring at the floor or reading off a piece of paper. Good job.

- **Gestures:** Kris has found the sweet spot between too much and too little movement of his hands; even better, he uses purposeful gestures like counting on his fingers. Additionally, Kris' *face* is expressive – a pro move.

- **Speed:** Again, Kris hits the sweet spot — not too slow, not too fast, and he uses pauses for effect. Heck, Kris even slows his cadence for his last lines (they start just before the 5:00 mark).

But let's pull out two Content problems in Kris' speech.

- He generally does *not* cite his sources. There is one exception, and that

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[27] Erik's website is PVLEGS.com.

is for the Nuke Map source.[28] However, Kris doesn't explain to us why his source is reliable.

- Using the questionable source, Kris provocatively claims that the Hiroshima bomb would not have destroyed our middle school had it been dropped in our small town.

Let me just be clear about how proud I am of Kris – this is promising public speaking for a young man. In fact, Kris' excellent Organization and Delivery were so impressive that **none of his classmates challenged him** on Content. (Notice how Tyler, in yellow, does the head exploding gesture after Kris is done.) Kris literally said that an atomic bomb would not destroy our middle school, and none of his opponents had a field day. The problem wasn't shyness — this debate took place in March. Instead, it was a lack of active argumentative listening when faced with far-above-average Organization and Delivery. I'm not sure yet how to teach students to always catch every Content misstep — because indeed, that would make us better at both World History and life — but showing Kris' speech in a positive, analytical manner has been a helpful start. Feel free to do likewise.

Speaking and listening instruction need be no more complex than Content, Organization, and Delivery, and the strategies used to practice those skills can be as simple as Think-Pair-Share and Pop-Up Debate. There is no need to constantly re-invent the wheel; what's important is that we give speaking its

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[28] Nuke Map is a real thing — it can be found here, and is the creation of Alex Wellerstein, founder of a blog called Restricted Data: The Nuclear Secrecy Blog. There are all kinds of interesting argumentative avenues in that last sentence alone.

well-deserved seat at the literacy instruction table.[29]

V. Grow Character

When I ask fellow teachers to envision a student whom they've recently taught and who they feel confident will succeed in life, I pose a simple follow-up question: Why did you pick that kid?

The adjectives that they use to explain their choices are what some scientists call <u>character strengths</u> and others call noncognitive skills.[30] They use adjectives like:

- passionate
- enthusiastic
- persevering
- gritty
- hard-working
- curious
- responsible

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[29] For more of my articles on speaking and listening, see the following list:
- <u>Simple Rubrics for Speaking and Listening Standards</u>

- <u>Can Pop-Up Debate Produce Grit in Students?</u>

- <u>A Non-Freaked Out Approach to the Common Core, Part 5 — Every Kid Speaks, Every Day</u>

[30] I use the "character strengths" terminology with students and the "noncognitive" terminology in my work with adults. This is mainly because 1) adults have baggage with the term character, while students tend not to, and 2) the use of "noncognitive/cognitive" terminology adds a helpful symmetry to this Non-Freaked Out framework (argument being a core cognitive competency). With that said, I will say that "noncognitive" is a misnomer; typically when I persist toward a passion for the long-haul — in other words, when I use grit — I'm doing a ton of conscious thinking. Grit, then, is very cognition-intensive work.

- kind

- resourceful

We call upon these descriptors instinctively, and a growing body of research shows is empirically showing their correlation with positive life outcomes.[31] With what we now know about the plasticity of the brain, there is no reason, then, that we ought not to try weaving solid, intentional experiments in character growth into our classrooms.

And so it is that a critical component of this literacy framework — one of the outside pieces that hold it all together — deals with character. For the sake of our discussion, let's divide this section into the holistic skills that touch all of life and the discrete skills that make us adaptive learners.

The holistic noncognitive skills, or "character strengths"

At the top of the east wall of my classroom hang eight student-created posters — these are the eight character strengths that a small group of colleagues and I have been teaching students since I first read Paul Tough's article in the New York Times titled "What if the Secret to Success is Failure?" several years ago.

Here they are, briefly — and I'll be using Character Lab's definitions, word-for-word (indicated by italics), as Character Lab is now, to my knowledge, the definitive source for teacher-friendly information on these strengths.

Curiosity *is a strong desire to learn or know something — a search for*

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[31] Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed* is the best primer on this research.

information for its own sake. This is one of the motivational strengths; curious students don't need elaborate hooks before reading a text. Our question, then, is how do we grow curiosity in students?

Some observable indicators of curiosity:

- *Eagerly exploring new things*
- *Asking questions that deepen understanding*
- *Taking an active interest in learning*

Gratitude *is the appreciation for the benefits we receive from others, and the desire to reciprocate.* Gratitude, as [I've written elsewhere](), serves as a motivational fuel — it makes us kinder, more hard-working, less stressed, and more able to sleep.

Some observable indicators of gratitude:

- *Recognizing what other people do for you*
- *Showing appreciation for opportunities*
- *Expressing appreciation by saying thank you or doing nice things for people*

Grit *is perseverance and passion for long-term goals.* It **is not** "Suck it up kid" or "You're poor because you're not gritty" — though some damaging implementations of grit around the country have all but said as much. Grit is exactly why this blog exists; it is why my marriage has lasted eight years. Neither my blog nor my marriage have been things I needed to simply endure, but both of those things have had seasons where persistence was important

and the fires of passion needed effortful stoking. That's what grit is — the ability to stoke one's own passion for months and years. And that is why grit is one of few commonalities between world-class experts in any field — oftentimes, such experts are simply the people who have worked hardest and longest, usually because of a near-obsessional passion for their subject.

Some observable indicators of grit:

- *Finishing what you begin*
- *Staying committed to your goals*
- *Working hard even after experiencing failure or when you feel like quitting*
- *Sticking with a project or activity for more than a few weeks*

Optimism *is being hopeful about future outcomes combined with the agency to shape our future.* Notice how far from passive this is — I am not being optimistic, in this sense, simply by believing things will work out in the long run; I'm only being optimistic if I combine that hope with concerted effort toward making it happen. Do you see how optimism, defined like this, can make our students more successful? It is the bridge for crossing what Dr. Jean Twenge calls the "Reality Gap" between how good young Americans expect their futures to be and how easily they expect that goodness to come to them.[32]

Some observable indicators of optimism:

- *Believing that effort will improve your future*

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[32] Twenge's research can be found in her book, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled — and More Miserable Than Ever Before*.

- *When bad things happen, thinking about what you could do to avoid similar bad outcomes in the future*
- *Staying motivated, even when things don't go well*

Self-control *is reigning in one's own responses so they align with short- and long-term goals.* This one gets fairly broad — it ranges from resisting the temptation to play video games until after homework is done to speaking politely to someone who has disrespected you. As such, it's useful to break self-control into two categories: 1) school- or work-related and 2) interpersonal.

Some observable indicators of school- or work-related self-control:

- *Coming to the office or class with everything needed to get to work rather than being unprepared*
- *Remembering and following directions rather than needing to be reminded*
- *Getting to work right away rather than procrastinating*
- *Paying attention rather than getting distracted*

Some observable indicators of interpersonal self-control:

- *Remaining calm, even when criticized or otherwise provoked, rather than losing your temper*
- *Allowing others to speak rather than interrupting*
- *Being polite to all, even when stressed or angry*

Social intelligence *is understanding feelings and using them to inform*

actions. There are two parts to this: understanding what's happening inside of yourself, and understanding what might be happening inside of another person. The socially intelligent kid is adept at detecting when someone is annoyed, sad, or angry, and he also has strategies for altering those emotions in others.

Some observable indicators of social intelligence:

- *Finding solutions during conflicts with others*
- *Demonstrating respect for the feelings of others*
- *Adapting to different social situations*

Zest *is also referred to as vitality, and it is an approach to life that is filled with excitement and energy*. You might be thinking, "Well, that sounds like being an extrovert," but think about that assumption a bit more. Does every extrovert you know approach life with excitement and energy? Not necessarily. Zest isn't about introversion or extraversion; rather, it is about being an energy-*giver* rather than an energy-*taker*; it's about managing one's energy levels through healthy habits and right thinking.

Some observable indicators of zest:

- *Actively participating by asking questions or listening closely*
- *Showing enthusiasm through smiles or excited comments*
- *Approaching new situations with excitement and energy*
- *Invigorating others around you*

Having a **Purpose** *means being driven by something larger than yourself.* I

can still remember how smart Aaron was during his freshmen year, but how dishearteningly lazy — by self-admission! — he was as well. Thankfully, things changed for Aaron when he discovered a field in engineering that excited him; suddenly, his formidable intellect was brought fully to bear on his studies, and he became the model student seemingly overnight. That is the power of purpose.[33]

Some observable indicators of purpose:

- *Being oriented toward a stated future goal*
- *Being able to articulate an interest and the "why" behind the interest*

One character strength not on my wall

It's worth noting that my wall doesn't reflect the full list of strengths at Character Lab's site — they add one more.

Growth mindset *means understanding that intelligence is can be developed*, and it's probably familiar to you if you've been a teacher for at least a few years as Carol Dweck's uber-bestseller *Mindset* has worked its way through the schools. Growth mindset is foundational for all character strength development. If a student doesn't understand that the brain is malleable and that character strengths are, by definition, strengthenable, you will struggle to take the risks and do the deliberate practice it takes to acquire skill.

Some observable indicators of growth mindset:

- *Taking on new challenges with optimism*

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[33] One of purpose's chief researchers is Dr. William Damon from Stanford. To view his talk on purpose, click here. Here is his book *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life*.

- *Being able to talk about what you learned*

The integrated nature of the character strengths

You'll notice that while each of these skills can be taught in isolation, none of them are truly isolated. Without optimism and self-control, it is very hard to have grit. Strong social intelligence makes interpersonal self-control easier. Gratitude can naturally increases zest and curiosity. In fact, these skills are so integrated that problems tend arise from when balance is lost.

That class clown? She's probably a really zesty, fairly socially intelligent kid. That's why she makes the class laugh so easily, and that's why she can't seem to restrain her outbursts. What she lacks, then, is perhaps self-control or grit or optimism.

That super smart kid who constantly asks questions and never does his homework? He's probably off the charts with curiosity, and below par with self-control (the homework) and social intelligence (there is such a thing as asking too many questions, probably, when learning with a group of 30 people).

Tools, not rules

The character strengths are a way of understanding and studying success. They provide us an interpretive model for understanding areas in our lives that could use improvement. Folks who decry the strengths seem to do so in response to rule-based approaches; to me, such declamations throw out a very precious baby with the bathwater.

Beyond the character strengths: Conley's Key

Learning skills and Techniques

One of my favorite aspects of the character strengths is that they are obviously applicable to all of life. However, this is also one of their chief weaknesses — students need a more specific set of skills and techniques if they are to navigate the terrain of school. For this, I turn back to Dr. David Conley's Four Keys framework (see Fig. 10). I won't get into them deeply here (namely because I've not explored them enough in my own classroom, but they are worth listing.[34]

FOUR KEYS TO COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Fig. 10   David Conley's Key Learning Skills & Techniques
Conley's KLST are comprised of both dispositional skills that add up to what he calls "ownership of learning" and specific techniques that successful students use to manage their coursework. Dr. Conley writes, "No single factor may be more important to student success than the degree to which students take ownership of their learning and are allowed to do so… [but] in addition to ownership, they need key, [research-identified] techniques."

Ownership of learning

You'll notice that some of these touch upon the character strengths (e.g., persistence is a key component of grit), and I like that because it gets our minds away from the trap of thinking there's a kind of inherent magic in the character strengths. The character strengths, rather, are labels for powerful skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that many researchers point to, albeit by sometimes differing names.

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[34] For a full treatment of each of the skills that follow, see Conley's *College, Careers, and the Common Core*, pp. 73-85.

Following are Dr. Conley's ownership of learning skills, complete with his descriptions[35]

- **Goal setting:** *Identify short- and long-term goals that align with aspirations as well as strengths and weaknesses; identify the steps necessary to attain goals; and make timely progress toward goals.*

- **Persistence:** *Persevere when faced with new, challenging, or unfamiliar tasks; assume responsibility for completing tasks as assigned.*

- **Self-awareness:** *Monitor the self as it evolves and grows to assess strengths, weaknesses, and interests; work toward improving weaknesses and to aligning goals to strengths and interests.*

- **Motivation:** *Self-motivate to find value in intrinsically uninteresting tasks; expend the effort necessary to remain engaged and motivated to complete tasks.*

- **Help-seeking:** *Become familiar with personal resources available in the current environment; be aware of progress on current tasks enough to know when help is needed; appropriately use resources to receive the help needed.*

- **Progress monitoring:** *Continually evaluate progress toward goals and the alignment between aspirations, qualifications, and evolving skills and interests.*

- **Self-efficacy:** *Be confident in one's ability to complete increasingly*

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[35] These are quoted from a page at EPIConline.org; the page has since been removed. EPIC is an incredible organization; visit their site and peruse their work here.

challenging and complex academic and career tasks; be able to build on past experiences and success to maximize future successes.

Learning Techniques

These are much more explicit skills that help people succeed in academic settings in particular and as learners in general. Again, the italics are Conley's descriptions.

- **Time management:** *Apply skills and strategies necessary to prioritize, plan, and sufficiently focus one's attention to get expected tasks completed on time.*

- **Test-taking:** *Be able to prepare for the assessment of one's knowledge and proficiencies; includes being able to recall and apply information in real time and in a variety of academic and applied assessment and evaluation contexts (quizzes, academic tests, performance reviews and evaluations, etc).*

- **Note-taking:** *Possess the strategies and skills necessary to prioritize, attend to, and record important information from texts, lectures, meetings, and tasks; includes referring back to notes as needed to more effectively complete future tasks.*

- **Memorization and recall:** *Possess multiple effective strategies and devices to memorize and recall facts and terms.*

- **Strategic reading:** *Be able to employ a variety of strategies to identify and extract relevant information from a variety of texts and formats that are specific to the chosen academic or career*

environment.

- ○ When faced with a textbook chapter on the early twentieth century or an article on igneous rock formation or an epic poem from Nordic culture, how do we make as much sense as we can given the time and ability constraints that face us?[36]
- **Collaborative learning:** *Develop the skills and strategies necessary to communicate and work collaboratively with diverse groups to meet specific objectives.*
- **Technological proficiency:***Develop sufficient familiarity and proficiency with the specific technology and technical tools used in the academic or career choice of interest.*

This component of the NFO Framework contains little that I've invented as a teacher, but it does represent a field of study that is far too often neglected conversations about literacy instruction. Every teacher hopes to teach elements of character; too few currently have a systematic approach for doing so.

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[36] We teachers face this question, too, when reading professional development materials. I've written about that at "How to Read PD Books: 7 Tactics You Might Not Be Using."

Moving forward from here

That, my friends, was a lot — and if you've made it this far, shoot me a [tweet](#) or a [Facebook message](#) to let me know what you thought.

The key power of this framework is that it allows us to focus on a few key areas of growth. This has been a large reason for my success inside and outside of the classroom: I don't have it all figured out, but I do know that focus is key if I'm going to become truly excellent at anything.

To learn more about bringing me to your school for a workshop on this topic, visit davestuartjr.com/literacy-workshop (or just [click here](#)).

To be in the group of people who get to follow this ebook's evolution into a traditionally published book, [head here](#) (or type this in your browser: davestuartjr.com/nfo-book-list

Thank you so much for reading this book. All the best to you.

Dave Stuart Jr.
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