12th grade is a difficult time in the life of a student. While balancing school work, a part time job, extracurriculars, and an all important social life, the student is now also expected to go through the motions of high school graduation and college applications, all the while battling against the gnawing lethargy of senioritis. The last thing that these mentally and physically stretched individuals want to deal with is an analytical essay or research paper assigned in English class. And who can blame them? Writing is a difficult task, and really, quite a waste when they’ll never have to write another once they finish school, right?

Unfortunately, this seems to be the attitude of many high school students, especially those in their final year. What they don’t realize is that, although challenging, the process and product of writing is a life skill that will help them immensely in both their personal and professional lives. It’s hard to see the connection between a report on the symbolism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and the personal statement on a job application, and it’s not always easy to understand the benefits of keeping a personal journal like the one that was required of you in your English class, but the connection is indeed there. It is this connection that my text set attempts to clarify. By explaining writing as a personally gratifying and ultimately beneficial skill, I hope that my text set will inspire students to see writing as something more than a required hassle. I do not intend to create an entire class of future novelists, but I do want to help each student find a place in their lives for writing through the stories and advice of other writers. The books in my text set were chosen because I thought that they, in one way or another, will help me do just that.

The imaginary class for which this text set is intended is a 12th grade English class. According to the SOLs, the main focus of the 12th grade year is writing, through both expository and research based papers, and literary analysis of both prose and poetry,
analysis which would typically take the form of some sort of written statement in either an essay or short answer examination. In essence, 12th graders are expected to write clearly, concisely, and consistently in order to accomplish many different goals. The literature in this text set is chosen to help students relate these goals to their own personal goals, thus making the assignments, and the skill of writing itself, more real and essentially more interesting to each individual student.

**SOLs Principally Addressed:**

12.7 The student will develop expository and informational writings.
   a) Generate, gather, and organize ideas for writing.
   b) Consider audience and purpose when planning for writing.
   c) Write analytically about literary, informational, and visual materials.
   d) Elaborate ideas clearly and accurately.
   e) Revise writing for depth of information and technique of presentation.
   f) Apply grammatical conventions to edit writing for correct use of language, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.
   g) Proofread final copy and prepare document for publication or submission.

12.8 The student will write documented research papers.
   a) Identify and understand the ethical issues of research and documentation.
   b) Evaluate the accuracy and usefulness of information.
   c) Synthesize information to support the thesis.
   d) Present information in a logical manner.
   e) Cite sources of information, using a standard method of documentation, such as that of the Modern Language Association (MLA) or the American Psychological Association (APA).
   f) Edit copies for correct use of language, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.
   g) Proofread final copy and prepare document for publication or submission.

**Text Item #1:** “Form, Not Plot, in the Short Story,” by Sherwood Anderson

This Chapter from Anderson’s autobiography, *A Story Teller’s Story*, describes the need to write short stories according to the form that they themselves naturally take, not by forcibly applying the words to a standard plot frame. The author talks about the development of a story as he experienced it as a young boy, watching his father wrestle mentally and physically with the characters and details forming the stories that he himself created. This story would be an excellent preparation tool in the classroom before we began talking about British literature. Specifically, there is an excellent resource of
British short stories on the BBC teaching English website, the reading and analysis of which will work toward the completion of SOL 12.3. The chapter has a Flesch-Kincaid reading level of 11, making it a potential piece for independent reading. Some of the text, however, speaks of specific authors, artists, and artworks, and some of the students in the class may not be able to handle a piece of the 11th grade level independently, so this will probably be an in-class discussion starter that would allow us to talk about short stories and their form and history before we began reading them. I think that Anderson’s tone, though somewhat lofty as he speaks of the Greeks and his thoughts on why American short story writers write as they do, is reflective enough in discussing his childhood and personal writing process that my students will be able to relate to it and make them think more about the joy and passion of writing.


Text Item #2: Bird by Bird, by Anne Lamott.
(This was my example that you already read-marked copy is attached to the end of the write-up.)

Anne Lamott’s novel, Bird by Bird, is a short but honest book filled with a wonderful and down-to-earth discussion of writing. It discusses all aspects of writing, from dialogue to writing groups, and does it in a humble and supportive way. I would use this book as an augmentation to the official classroom text in a 12th grade English class. I think that certain chapters, especially the one entitled “Shitty First Drafts,” would be both inspirational and informative for students who experience massive amounts of frustration in the face of research papers and SOL writing prompts. Specifically, this book would be used during the research paper writing phase, which fulfills SOLs 12.7 and 12.8, as a way to relieve a little tension and remind students that writing, though often times enjoyable and rewarding, is truly a difficult process for even the most successful writers. I feel that it will be relatable to all students because of the warm, honest tone that Lamott uses in writing her advice, and it will help prepare students to deal with critiques and revisions without breaking down into defeated tears. The novel
could be used in either the introductory phase of the lesson as a sort of preparation, or in the assistance phase if the instructor feels that the students are becoming disheartened or unmotivated. As it is on the 9th grade reading level according to Flesch-Kincaid, most chosen excerpts can be read independently. However, because I enjoy the text so much, I would also be quite likely to read some of it aloud. Some of the content, mostly in the realm of language, may be considered slightly mature or inappropriate to some individuals. However, I do not think that it at all detracts from the text, nor is it strong enough that it would distract the reader from the text’s ultimate purpose: to inform and support a writer in an entertaining and light-hearted manner.


**Text Item #3: A True and Faithful Narrative**, by Katherine Sturtevant

Sturtevant’s novel is the second in a series that tells the story of a sixteen year old girl, Meg, growing up in 17th century England. Her tale is one of great struggle, as she yearns to write and work as a book seller in a society where women are not tolerated as members of literary society. Flesch-Kincaid places this novel at the 6th grade reading level, a level at which most 12th grade students should be able to read it independently. Also, due to the lofty tone of typical 17th century English, the text should avoids an immature feel that may make it unappealing to more advanced readers. The novel’s content would definitely appeal to the young ladies in the class, as it is written in a first person journal format by a character that is their age and gender, and would also be of interest to the boys, as it includes details of piracy and exploration. The novel would satisfy SOL 12.3 by giving students a look at a specific era in literary history, and could also inspire creation of the presentation required of students in SOL 12.2 or an expository essay like that required in SOL 12.7. The novel would also make it possible for students to connect their history lesson to English class. Finally, the novel does an excellent job of showing students what it might be like if writing were a pastime that they were not permitted to participate in instead of a required assignment, a side of writing and its history that probably doesn’t cross the minds of modern students.
Text Item #4: *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, by Lynne Truss

As a potential English teacher who does not enjoy the strict semantics of grammar, I consider this book a staple to anyone’s personal library. Truss explains exactly why editors, proofreaders, and, yes, English teachers, are so picky when it comes to punctuation and its correct usage. Through clear examples and entertaining explanations, Truss helps readers understand how one little marking can dramatically change the meaning of what a writer is attempting to say. At a 12th grade reading level, according to Flesch-Kincaid, this book would most likely be a text requiring some guidance. Due to its rather specific, fact-driven nature, I could see myself using this text for an activity like a ReQuest. Also, I would definitely run off photocopies of the chapter “That’ll do, Comma,” which I would then either have the students read independently and then discuss it as a class, or I would read aloud as the students followed along. In addition, this book would be an excellent reference for students who aren’t quite sure what to do with semicolons or dashes, marks that are often misused or abused. The novel, therefore, would be used either in the preparation or the assistance stages, as students get ready for and work on research papers for SOL 12.8, and of course as excellent training for their English 200 paper that they’ll need to write in the freshman year of college. My only concern is that on occasion, Truss is a tad preachy, and some of her grammatical points seem up to interpretation. These preachy bits, however, are in sections of the book that I really wouldn’t consider for instruction, so I’m not going to worry about them.


Text Item #5: “Blocked,” by Ralph Ellison

At some point, all people, including well known and revered writers, experience mental blockage of some sort. Ellison’s essay discusses this phenomenon and the history
of its development, including philosophical theories behind its existence. Ellison includes details on specific cases of writer’s block including the effects that drugs and alcohol can have on the creative process, the stress of writing a second novel, and the general difficulty inherent in choosing “art-making” as a career. I think this essay is an excellent historical and personal look at writing as a creative career, and offers a reassuring message to students who might be struggling to get their words onto paper. The essay is on a 12th grade level, and has lots of references to writers and works that students may not be familiar with, making it a text that we would use in class as a sort of real life connection as students worked on their first drafts of the first writing assignment of the year. With the plethora of references, this essay could be used as a webquest, letting students search online for the names mentioned, or as a KWL activity. Use of this text would, from the beginning, instill in students the idea that writer’s block is normal, and that good writing takes time and revision. This text would be entertaining to students as it helped them ease into their writing assignments that fulfill SOLs 12.7 and 12.8.


**Text Item #6: Write to TV, by Martie Cook**

Cook gives readers an extremely thorough look at writing as it relates to the TV industry, including how-to instructions on finding an agent and getting your manuscripts read. Also, and of more interest to me personally, Cook includes advice on character development and dialogue writing, two things that can make or break a narrative, and two things that are often difficult for both new and experienced writers. This book would provide and excellent resource for students, as it would assist any students experiencing difficulty in story development, and acts as a great example of a connection between classroom and life. Students may not be too interested in writing the next best selling dramatic novel, but they may think that the idea of writing for the next popular sitcom is wicked cool. In this way, I would be able to get media driven students to express interest in writing by making it relevant to their lives. Flesch-Kincaid places this book at the 8th grade level, making it accessible for most students to use on their own as long as it is
simply available in the class. Also, it could be used as a great starting point for an expository writing assignment for SOL 12.7, or as a resource to discuss the success or failure of storylines that students see in their own favorite programs. Of course, if my class is disinterested in TV in general, I could just leave this book on my shelf. However, if I do have the chance to tie television or other forms of popular media back to the written word, as a lover of words and writing, I just don’t think I could ignore it.

Cook, Martie. *Write to TV, Out of your Head and onto the Screen*. Focal Press, Burlington, MA: 2007

**Text Item #7:** *Proposal Writing, Effective Grantsmanship*, by Soraya M. Coley and Cynthia A. Scheinberg.

Coley and Scheinberg’s book explores the many aspects of successful grant proposal writing in a way that informs students and beginning grant writers in a supportive and educational manner. From clearly writing a request, to the effects of the economy on a proposal’s chance of approval, the book covers requests from start to finish. This book not only makes connections from writing to the real world that students might deal with outside of the classroom, it also opens the doors to resources that students might not know exist as they attempt to make a difference in their personal lives and beyond that, in their world. At some points, the book is similar to a textbook, in that it offers definitions important in proposal writing and explains the different types of grants that students might need to use. However, it also contains step-by-step instructions on specific forms of grants and how to determine which type of grant you should write for your organization, helping students think introspectively on the mission of whatever group or organization for which they are seeking a grant. At a Flesch-Kincaid 12th grade level, the book would be approachable to some students on an independent level. For this reason, the book would probably be used as an in-class resource, and could be introduced with a book inventory so that students would be more comfortable with its contents and how to use them. The text is very specific to SOL 12.7, which requires students to write expository compositions, including “technical writing” which “clarifies information of a specialized nature for a targeted audience.” I would use this as a chance to ask students...
to look at the problems facing their own communities, find, or even create, a local organization that might best address one of these problems, and then write a grant proposal in hope to receive financial assistance for a particular event that the organization wishes to hold. In this way, writing could be clearly seen as a skill valuable outside of the classroom.


**Text Item #8: A Man without a Country, by Kurt Vonnegut**

I’ve included this text, not only because I don’t think I could teach a class without including something from the library of Vonnegut, but also because it is short, unintimidating, and hilarious. The book in its entirety is described as “As close as Vonnegut ever comes to a memoir,” and as such, includes a chapter entitled “Here is a Lesson in Creative Writing.” In this chapter, Vonnegut describes, and charts, the typical plot lines of most popular stories, and explains why these plot lines are so frequently used and well loved, and why, for these reasons, they are good plot lines to choose if one wants to sell his or her writing. I think this chapter would be an excellent chance to provide a little breather from the more serious side of writing and revision necessary for SOLs 12.7 and 12.8, while giving students a little insight into the sociology of writing and why someone might say a piece is “good” or “bad,” simply because it is personally uplifting or relatable for that critic individually. This would give me a chance to talk about grading and critiquing as subjective processes and the inability to be an unbiased editor. This is a lesson students can remember and reflect on when they receive results from standardized writing assessments, in-class essays, and peer reviews. Plus, it’d be a chance to give a shameless plug for one of my favorite writers! The Flesch-Kincaid readability formula places the book at an upper 8th grade level, making it generally accessible to most students, and the light hearted tone that Vonnegut uses throughout the book will make students more apt to see it as “enjoyable” instead of “required,” and might even inspire students to explore more of Vonnegut’s work. Did I mention I liked him?

Text Item #9: *The Black Book*, by Orhan Pamuk.

This book, originally written by Pamuk in his native Turkish language, is a collection of stories, many of which deal with writing to some extent. The story which made me choose to include this book in my set is called “I Must be Myself.” In this story, Pamuk discusses a confrontation he had with one of the readers of his newspaper column where the reader asked if it was possible that “a man can only be himself?” This question, though initially joked away by Pamuk, inspired serious introspection that leads to Pamuk’s discussion on the ease with which a writer can slip into the role that the public expects him or her to take, abandoning his or her own creative ideas and desires. I think this story would be a valuable discussion starter while students undergo the peer editing and critiquing portion of SOLs 12.7 and 12.8, as it might be easy for students, especially when tired from writing the paper itself, to just accept all corrections and suggestions given by their peers without realizing how those changes affect the representation of their own voice in the writing. Also, the fact that Pamuk’s work is of Turkish origin fulfills part of SOL 12.3, in which students are to read and discuss literature from different cultures. Although Flesch-Kincaid places this book at about an 11th grade reading level, the sentence structure is a little awkward, most likely due to the nature of translation. For this reason, I think this story would definitely used as a Read Aloud in class so that I could provide reading guidance.


Text Item #10: “My Name is Gabito”, by Monica Brown

I saved this one for last because I like it so much. This is a book about a young boy named Gabito who had a special talent for seeing the world around him in all its beauty and wonder, and then writing what he saw down for all to read. As he got older, he became a loved and successful writer, a writer better known as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The great thing about this book is that it is written in both English and Spanish, so it can reach many ESL students who might otherwise miss out, and it can expose American students to a beautiful picture of a culture they may know nothing about. The
book is a children’s book, yet Flesch-Kincaid places it at a 6th grade level. I think that certain names and words may have skewed this readability level, and Amazon.com agrees with me, stating that the book is appropriate for ages 4-8. In any case, the message of the book fits beautifully in with the message of the text set and the need for writing in one’s life for both practical and beautiful reasons. Also, the story could be an excellent segue into reading one of Marquez’s novels.

Brown, Monica. “My Name is Gabito.” Luna Rising, Flagstaff, AZ: 2007