

by Sarah Tanner-Anderson

Civil Rights Writing Project: Ten Days of Difference

In a time of high stakes, hands-in-the-air standardization, teachers and students alike often feel robbed of creativity in the classroom. It seems as though each day is another ‘stick-up’ that takes away from our ability to provide learners with any semblance of a well rounded educational experience. Yet, I believe, as many of my fellow English educators believe, that it is our duty to shout from the mountain tops, “NO! We shall overcome!”

We **can** instill good writing habits, an appreciation for the arts, and an understanding of historical movements that have shaped who we are as a culture today. We **can** instruct good reading habits, skills, and strategies to be successful students and successful citizens who will go on to accomplish great things. We **can** nurture creativity in written and spoken expression. Even though many of our classrooms are dictated day-to-day and week-to-week by standardized benchmarks that limit our time and patience, teachers must continue to expect students to learn—truly learn—through individual and collaborative exploration. With this in mind, I created a hands-on, multifaceted writing project that centers on civil rights activism to teach persuasive writing.

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Utilizing poetry, essays, narratives, public speaking, music, and art, I crafted a project that not only teaches elements of persuasion but also provides an opportunity for students to explore civil rights activism of the past, present, and future. Through an intensive research project, students analyze various elements of the Civil Rights Movement, identify current civil rights issues,

and explore ways in which equality in civil rights can be supported and protected for generations to come. Students are provided with an opportunity to both collaboratively and individually identify, explore, and explain civil rights issues in a

concisely defined time period—ten days, in fact—wherein they will learn the multimodal power of persuasion.

Setting It Up

Before the project begins, I informally assess what students know about two topics: civil rights and persuasive argumentation. I deliberately link these two topics together from the start, since my overall project goal is to achieve a natural progression towards an intertwined understanding of both. I generally provide a broad overview of civil rights (I have found that my students al-

ready know much about the topic.) from which students can later research. The tricky part, I have found, is getting to the heart of persuasion. Students seem to understand that to persuade means to convince, but they find it difficult to develop or create effective persuasion in their writing. By the conclusion of the project, however, students will have gained an understanding of persuasion in many forms—art, music, poetry, essays, and public speaking—that will collectively guide them to utilize effective persuasive elements in their writing.

I find it helpful to begin my lesson with various examples of persuasive writing during the Civil Rights Movement. Such writings may include essays and public speaking examples such as the famous “I Have a Dream” speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. and “Loneliness in the Circle of Trust” by Chude Pam Parker Allen; poetry examples such as “Jim Crow: The Sequel” by June Jordan, “Mississippi Voter Rally” by Bruce Hartford, “Ella’s Song” by Bernice Johnson Reagon, and “Ballad of Birmingham” by Dudley Randall; and music examples such as “We Shall Overcome” by Joan Baez, “For What It’s Worth” by Buffalo Springfield, “Blowin’ in the Wind” by Bob Dylan, and “Testify” by modern civil rights activists, Rage Against the Machine. For students, this knowledge establishes a broad understanding of historical movements, provides a basis for research, and illustrates a number of persuasive techniques (emotional and logical appeals, supporting evidence, etc.). Once we discuss the various writings, I provide students with research goals and a detailed schedule of project ex-

pectations (see Appendix A).

The culminating project then begins with teacher-defined, research-specific goals. Students examine areas of the Civil Rights Movement, and, to ensure that the research stays focused, I generally assign topics that center around race rights, women’s rights, voter’s rights, and socioeconomic rights. Throughout their research, students are re-

quired to find several examples of speeches, narratives, poetry, music lyrics, and images that capture the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. Of course, the Internet is filled with resources that focus on civil rights; however, as most now

know, potential sites must be previewed to ensure that the content is age-appropriate for minor students.

Although it takes a bit of time to create them, I assign students to Freedom Groups—the heart of the project—wherein research findings are disseminated, examples of persuasion are discussed, and students are given the opportunity to ‘own’ the information they have gathered. Before students immerse themselves in the writing portion of the project, Freedom Groups are required to create some sort of artistic representation of the Civil Rights Movement from the research they have conducted. I encourage students to use multiple mediums; and I provide markers, colored pencils, crayons, glitter, scraps of cloth, felt, and paper, and any other craft-oriented materials I have around the classroom. Once completed, I use the artistic representations as decorative learning foci for both the classroom and the hallway.

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Next, students work with their Freedom Groups as they take persuasive essays through the steps of the writing process. I assign a persuasive essay, utilizing the following prompt: *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."*

Write an essay that explains whether you agree or disagree with Dr. King's statement. Students are expected to craft a well-developed essay that will be scored

according to the domains of composing, written expression, and usage and mechanics as found in Virginia's Standards of Learning for English Language Arts (SOLs). The scoring rubric is attached as Appendix B.

Over the course of the project, Freedom Groups meet daily to discuss writing issues and peer-evaluate writing through each step of the writing process. I often encourage students to first choose a favorite prewriting strategy—brainstorming, clustering, freewriting, etc.—and take their thoughts through one cycle of prewriting. After reviewing individual prewriting, students then prewrite within the Freedom Group to see how their ideas can grow, change, and meld into new approaches from which each student can further explore in the rough draft.

Once students complete a rough draft, they meet with Freedom Groups for peer-revising and editing. Students must pay specific attention to elements of effective writing as prescribed by the SOL writing domains,

such as the presence of a clear, concise thesis, a well-organized response that stays on-topic and links back to the main idea, a distinctive voice and personality, a variety of sentences and word choices, and consistent control of capitalization, punctuation, spelling, style, and grammar.

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The final project component requires students to employ elements of public speaking to illustrate what they have learned. Students will watch examples of persuasive public speaking from the Civil Rights Movement through today. I like to use the "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. because students are familiar with the piece from earlier in the project. Throughout the clip, I ask students to note effective persuasive techniques that can be used in their presentations, such as inflection, timing, and rhythm. They will then be given time to practice presentations within the Freedom Group before presenting to the class.

As the project concludes, I am always amazed by the students' ability to turn ideas into polished products. I have found this project to be especially effective with eighth-grade students as it showcases creativity and self-expression through writing. By allowing for opportunities to collaborate through Freedom Groups, students take ownership of their individual ideas while offering suggestions and comments to strengthen their peers' writing as well. This project enhances student knowledge by making historical con-

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nections with the Civil Rights Movement, evaluating and persuasive techniques in poetry, essays, and narratives and, in turn, writing a persuasive essay, creating and critiquing public-speaking presentations, and evaluating the power of persuasion in art and music. By the time they finish their individual products, students have gained an interdisciplinary, cross-curricular and comprehensive understanding of the art of persuasion.

Works Referenced

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Appendix A

Ten Days of Difference Daily Schedule

Day One:

Get to the core! Research specific events from the Civil Rights Movement.

Day Two:

Finish researching events from the Civil Rights Movement. Print out or save images, writings, and music lyrics from the Movement to use later.

Day Three:

Join Freedom Group based on central topics such as racism, women's rights, and economic equality. Meet in these groups daily to craft persuasive essay. Discuss research findings in individual groups.

Day Four:

In Freedom Group, create an artistic representation detailing the injustices of the assigned topic. Be sure to use elements of persuasion to enhance the effectiveness of the representation. These elements may include any images or writings found during research, or may include images created using paint, markers, or other materials. Representations will be used to decorate the classroom and/or the school display cases.

Day Five:

After meeting with Freedom Group, begin prewriting for persuasive essay. When finished with prewriting activities, begin writing rough draft of persuasive essay. Share ideas with Freedom Group if time permits.

Day Six:

Meet with Freedom Group to peer-revise essay. Using the suggestions of the group and the SOL writing rubric, write a fresh copy of the essay for editing.

Day Seven:

Again using the SOL writing rubric, meet with Freedom Group to peer-edit essay.

Day Eight:

Using the suggestions of the group and referring to the SOL writing rubric, write the final copy of the essay.

Day Nine:

Complete the final copy and practice presenting the essay as a speech or dramatic reading.

Day Ten:

Present the essay in the fashion of great Civil Rights activists!

Appendix B

Ten Days of Difference SOL-based Writing Rubric

Part I: Freedom Group Section

_____ 20 points Group participation and discussion:

The student should make every effort to provide meaningful and constructive comments, research, and/or suggestions for the good of the group.

_____ 10 points Artistic representation:
The student should actively participate in the creation of the group's artistic representation.

_____ 10 points Peer-revising and peer-editing of persuasive paper:
Utilizing a teacher-created peer spreadsheet, the student should peer-revise and peer-edit group members' papers and provide constructive feedback for each paper reviewed.

_____ 10 points Preparing for the final presentation:

The student should carefully practice and become familiar with his or her presentation while also providing constructive critiques of group members' presentations.

_____ Total (out of 50 possible for Part I)

Part II: Persuasive Essay Portion

_____ 50 points Persuasive essay
The student must write a well-developed essay in response to the following prompt:
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." Write an essay that explains whether you agree or disagree with Dr. King's statement.

The student must pay specific attention to elements of effective writing as prescribed by the SOL writing domains, such as the presence of a clear, concise thesis, a well-organized response that stays on-topic and links back to the main idea, a distinctive voice and personality, a variety of sentences and word choices, and consistent control of capitalization, punctuation, spelling, style, and grammar.

_____ Total (out of 50 possible for Part II)

_____ Total Civil Rights Writing Project
Score Out of 100 Possible

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