

6 The Class Novel

Choosing one novel for all students is based on the belief that, if everyone is doing the same thing, all are included.

What Was

In our intermediate and middle-years classes, the class novel has too often become the backbone of the English/Language Arts program. Teaching a novel usually means analysis and close examination of literary elements, such as the plot line, the author's intent, and literary techniques. A whole class novel is manageable. The same assignments are used for everyone. Everyone is working at the same time, in the same place, at the same pace. It is traditional. It takes up time.

We believe that the time has passed when one size fits all. One of the challenges of today's diverse classes is that, when a teacher chooses one novel for the entire class, rarely can all the students actually read the novel. So the teacher, in an attempt to include everyone in discussions about the novel, reads it to them, chapter by chapter. Two things then happen:

- a great deal of time is devoured
- most students engage in almost no actual reading

Neither of these results promote personal growth in reading. Nor do they create conditions for developing an enthusiasm for and a love of reading. The more-able readers are bored, the less-able readers are dormant.

What Can Be

Novel study can be a worthy activity if it is

- brief
- well-introduced
- adapted to the class needs
- encouraging and supporting students' independent reading

We do believe that teaching a novel to the entire class is a worthy activity. However, we have come to rely on a set of beliefs for this teaching:

- The novel study should take three to four weeks at a maximum, as there simply isn't enough reading time for students otherwise.
- The novel needs to be introduced in a way that sets up all students to want to read it and be more able to read it.
- Not every chapter needs to be processed in the same depth; i.e., assigned a strategy, discussed, worked over.
- Not every literary technique or comprehension strategy needs to be covered in every novel. Teachers choose a theme, a technique, or a focus, and address this in one novel, knowing that they can address other curriculum goals using another novel.
- Students need to read independently as much as they can.
- Comprehension questions, chapter by chapter, take up valuable time and teach nothing.

- The purpose of a novel study is to become engrossed in a good read, not to do “stuff” like comprehension questions and book reports.
- A whole-class novel is an appropriate time to introduce, teach, model, and practise a reading/thinking strategy that students can later use in their independent reading.

Connecting: Building Background

Several strategies build background knowledge and increase a student’s interest and motivation to read. Teachers may choose to use one or more of these strategies, depending on the needs of their students. They are usually the students’ first introduction to the novel, and precede naming the text or any preamble about it.

Gallery Walk

1. Collect a series of images or artifacts that represent the setting of the novel, or things that are particularly important to the characters in the novel. Place them around the room, arranged so that students in groups of three can meet to examine them: i.e., for a class of 30 students, you would display ten items.
2. In groups of three, students discuss what they are seeing and what it might tell them about the novel. Students spend about three minutes at each item. Students do not need to see all artifacts—visiting four is plenty.
3. Upon returning to their seats, students write for ten minutes, explaining what they think they now know about the novel.
4. Student writing is shared with all the images or artifacts are displayed, so students can predict which images or artifacts each author actually examined.

Historical Picture Book

1. Choose a picture book that builds background knowledge about a novel whose setting is not well-known to the students in the class. This can be either historical (When) or geographic (Where).
2. As you read the picture book, show the pictures and discuss the language and the images with the students.
3. Read the picture book again, focusing the students on two aspects and making two-column notes:

Historical or Geographic Fact	My Connections
-------------------------------	----------------
4. Students can work in pairs to embellish their notes, highlighting and noting three to five aspects of either history (When) or geography (Where).
5. Hear at least one response from each pair, building a class web focusing on either the When or the Where information.

Choice Beginnings

1. Choose 15 to 20 image-producing words from the novel. Tell students that you are going to read a series of image-producing words from the upcoming novel, and invite them to respond to these words by asking questions, making predictions, or sketching.
2. Invite students to predict which response format they are most likely to use and to tell this to a partner.
3. Read the words to the students several times, inviting them to listen and respond as they are ready. Plan on reading the words as often as five or six times, encouraging the students to NOT copy down the words, but listen and respond to them.
4. Check to see how many students expected to respond in one way, then responded in another. Hear some of the questions and predictions, and see some of the images.

Processing: Building Meaning

These strategies bear repeating, so students gain skill in using the thinking behind the strategy in their independent reading. However, it is inappropriate to work with a strategy with each and every chapter. That means too much teaching and too little time supporting students in working toward independence as thoughtful readers.

Once some background and motivation has been built, some classes are able to begin independently reading the novel. However, other classes demand more teacher support with the language, structure, style, or background knowledge needed to fully understand the novel. If this is the case, the first chapter might be read aloud by the teacher, while the students engage in one of the strategies outlined here. These strategies can also be relevant later in the novel, with the teacher reading aloud a chapter or a segment of a chapter that requires additional teaching.

For Quadrants of a Thought as part of a strategic sequence, see page 17 in chapter 1.

Quadrants of a Thought

1. Students fold a piece of paper in four and label the quadrants **Image**, **Language**, **Physical Senses**, and **Emotions**.
2. As the teacher reads, students are invited to record, in two of the four boxes, what is going on in their minds about the text. Students will sketch in the **Image** quadrant; record significant words, phrases, or quotes in the **Language** quadrant; record sounds, smells, the sense of touch or movement, and tastes in the **Physical Senses** quadrant; and note the emotional reactions of either themselves or the characters in the **Emotions** quadrant.
3. Read one or two pages of the text, then stop and hear what students have been recording.
4. Make a quadrant on the overhead and record the student responses. Students are not required to copy down what is on the overhead, but may use any of the ideas there, as they wish.
5. Continue the process, stopping again, adding to the class recording. Ask the students to be noticing what is changing in their thinking and their recording as you continue.
6. Stop and debrief a third time, if appropriate, then read uninterrupted to the end; or assign the students to finish the chapter reading independently.

Filling in two quadrants is enough to begin with, and will grow with practice to include all four quadrants.

Recording the class responses develops a whole-class appreciation of what others are thinking and helps develop a greater understanding of personal connections and interpretations.

Listen/Sketch/Draft

1. Students fold a page into four or six boxes. They will use two boxes for each chunk of text, so you'll have to decide how many chunks you will be processing.
2. Read the first part of the chapter and invite students to sketch what is happening as you read.
3. Stop reading, give a few moments for the sketching to finish, then invite students to share their sketches and their thinking with a partner.
4. Hear samples of the partners' conversations by asking the question, "What surprised you about your partner's thinking?" or "What did your partner do differently from you?" or "What do you know now that you didn't before your conversation?"
5. Students quickly record, in writing, what is important to remember in the first chunk of text.
6. Continue this process for one or two more chunks, then have students complete the reading of the first chapter independently.

Clustering from Text

1. Read the first few pages of the text to the students. As you read, invite students to quickly cluster their thinking about the text, important words from the text, and their connections to the text.
2. Ask students to circle two powerful words in their cluster.
3. Use these powerful words to make a class cluster on the board. Invite each student to be prepared to contribute.
4. As students contribute their ideas, remind them that you can record, but you cannot read their minds, so they need to tell you where to place each idea; i.e., students are categorizing as they build the class cluster.
5. When all have contributed and the board is full, take out colored chalk or colored overhead pens. Each student now has a chance to rearrange the cluster by connecting words that were not previously connected and explaining their relationship. This part of the strategy really deepens understanding.
6. Once the cluster is "messed up" and most of the words have been reconnected, students write for ten minutes in response to what has been read. Expect the writing to demonstrate a thoughtful, connected, powerful understanding.

Students looking for more ideas may ask you to reread the text.

Students are encouraged to contribute an idea, to categorize or connect this idea to others, and to explain why they placed the idea where they did. We call this "because" thinking.

During Reading

Partner Reading

If students still cannot independently read the text, we place the students in reading partners for the duration of a class novel. When assigning a chapter or two to read, the partners work together during class time. The rule is that they need to arrange a way of reading that ensures that each partner reads at least some of

The intent is to move through the novel more quickly than in the past, and also to increase the amount of time students actually engage in reading.

every second page—even if it is only a line! We set up the partnerships, considering social issues (who can work with whom) and reading skill (in each partnership, one person needs to be able to read longer passages). As the students are reading, we move among the partners, listening in and supporting as needed.

Sticky Notes

Sometimes the students just mark the spot with their sticky notes; more often they write or draw on them.

We encourage students to read with sticky notes in hand, distributing them to the partner groups. Their task, as they read, is to use the sticky notes to mark places in the text where

- there is exquisite language
- a strong emotion is evoked
- a clear image is created
- they are confused and need to ask a question
- they say, “Oh, wow!”
- they find a phrase they want to use

Students take the sticky note from the novel and place it on their desk as they speak. Then, at a glance, we all can tell who has not yet had a chance to speak and who has.

This tiny strategy causes a great deal of literate conversation to occur. When the partners are finished reading, we hold a class conversation based on what is written and drawn on the sticky notes. Many more students participate in this whole-class conversation, because they have already rehearsed with their partners. The conversation is less likely to be controlled by a verbal few. We begin our conversations each time with a different focus, sometimes beginning with the “Oh, Wow!” statements, sometimes with the images, sometimes with the questions. Again, this changes who begins first in the conversation.

Response Journals

After the class conversation, we move to writing in response journals. All students are more able to participate in writing a thoughtful response, because they have been supported before the writing, rather than getting feedback after the writing.

We do not ask comprehension questions as we are progressing through the novel. These are not supportive of developing more thoughtful readers or of increasing reading skill. They are the stuff that kills reading by over-monitoring. They are not real questions, as we teachers already know the answers. We try and engage students in real responses—explaining their thinking and reactions, and generating their own questions to develop understanding about the novel. Samples of the kinds of response journals we use are explained in chapter 7.

Final Assignments

The final assignment is assigned by the middle of the novel study, so students can be collecting information and working with the end in mind. We try and have these assignments be open-ended enough that all can participate and can stretch themselves in making new connections.

On the following pages, you will find a sample for the novel *Tuck Everlasting*, called “What? So What?” (page 76) and a sample for *Touching Spirit Bear* that focuses on Drama (page 77).

Thanks to teacher, Tina Pali, for contributing the *Tuck Everlasting* assignment.

WHAT? SO WHAT?

Main Assignment for *Tuck Everlasting*

WHAT?

- Carefully choose a combination of five objects, places, and people that are important to the story. (Grade 6 and some ESL students will do three).
- Draw, color, and label each object/place/person.
- Write a quote from the book that relates to that object/place/person, and include the page number.

SO WHAT?

- Tell why each object/place/person is important to the story. Why do you think the author included them in the story? Do they represent something more than meets the eye? An idea? A theme? A value?

CRITERIA

You will earn two marks, Art and Reading.

Art Mark: The five drawings will go toward your ART mark.

- Your drawings are original, colorful, and detailed.
- They complement your quote from the book.

Reading Mark (the written work):

- Your quote from the book matches your drawing.
- Your So What? tells, in your own words, why the object in your illustration is important to the story. This will be approximately 20–25 words.
- Your explanation goes beyond the obvious.
- Your presentation is neat (published on the computer, or neat printing/hand-writing) and has few errors in conventions.

4 Exceeds Expectations	3 Fully Meets Expectations	2+ Generally Meets Expectations	2 Minimally Meets Expectations	1 Not Yet Within Expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All criteria met• Shows depth, original insights, and connections• Completed with extra care and effort• Outstanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong, confident work• All criteria met• Very good effort• Completed with care	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Capable work• Most criteria met• May be lacking in depth or clarity• May be concerns about presentation or conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some criteria met• Satisfactory work• No extras• May lack detail and clarity• May be concerns with effort, presentation, or conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Few criteria met• Lack of effort in all areas

Due Date: Your assignment will be due shortly after completion of the novel. However, there will be several draft checks prior to the due date, in order to avoid procrastination!

Parent Signature: _____

DRAMA

Main Assignment for *Touching Spirit Bear*

WHAT?

- Work in groups of 2–6.
- Choose a significant scene from the novel that can be acted out by the number of people in your group.
- Write a script for your scene.
- Practise your script.
- Include props, costumes, and backdrops, as you see fit.
- Be prepared to dramatize your scene for the rest of the class.
- You will have 2 in-class periods to work on this.

CRITERIA

You will be marked on both your script/scene and on your performance.

Script/Scene Mark:

- scene chosen is significant within the novel
- dialogue matches the author’s language/character choice and does not stray from the text
- all characters have “speaking” parts (or a pseudo voice for the Spirit Bear)
- script and choice of scene reflect an understanding of the novel

Performance Mark:

- voices are audible
- characters act while “reading” their lines (Your lines do not have to be memorized, but you should be acting, not just reading your lines.)
- the portrayal of the characters is credible
- appropriate use of props and backdrops

4 Exceeds Expectations	3 Fully Meets Expectations	2.5 Generally Meets Expectations	2 Minimally Meets Expectations	1 Not Yet Within Expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All criteria met • Shows insight in interpretation • Writing shows individuality of characters • Creates a mood • All group members skillfully involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All criteria met • Well interpreted • Writing matches characters • Attempts to create a mood • All group members involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most criteria met • Shows general understanding of the novel • Writing quite plausible • Captures a moment in the novel • Most group members involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some criteria met • Inaccurate interpretation of the novel • Writing lacks detail, depth • Mostly retelling • Work appears to have been the result of only a few students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few criteria met • Lack of understanding of the novel • Undeveloped script or performance • Few students participating

