



Building a Community of Writers and Thinkers Lessons for the beginning of the school year

Overview: This series of lessons walks teachers through how to build a community of writers and thinkers by playing games that promote thinking and teach ways of organizing and communicating thought. Students practice reflective writing and creating skits that focus on audience and language of appeals.

Standards:

W.11-12.2 - 5

SL. 11-12.1a-d, 2, 3, 5, 6

L.11-12.1-3

Objectives:

- Engage in casual conversation in an effort to build classroom community.
- Evaluate the steps that must be taken to complete a task.
- Cooperate with peers in analyzing the situation and determining which course of action is the most logical and effective.
- Exchange ideas and develop a writing plan of action.
- Draft a narrative with special attention being paid to the use of language for the audience specified.
- Use correct grammar, punctuation, syntax.
- Edit, revise, and proof the group writing.

Week 1: Getting Going

Notes to the Instructor: *In my classes, I like to try to spend the first week of a semester building class coherence, ensuring that students know each other and their instructor before we plunge into the intellectual adventuring we do together. In my experience, this time has been well-spent: the activities give us all a chance to get to know each other, and the increased comfort in the classroom leads to more dynamic discussions and increased trust between the instructor and students.*

Day 1:

Introductions: Me. Then you. (Have students answer roll call with hometown, favorite vegetable, or most beloved office supply. It is important to let them know that the classroom operates in this funny way.)

Define Rhetoric, course policy, goals, some of the approaches we take.



Play the first game: CATEGORIES

Categories Game

This game allows students to move around a little, in shy, non-embarrassing ways, checking each other out, checking you out. It allows them to see that you, as the instructor, care about giving them opportunities to do that. It allows them to see that you are not so worried about looking like a geek. It allows them to see who else is in the room, and to find out certain little bits of information about them.

Here's **how** the game works: time to shuffle around a little.

Have students move the desks until there is a big clear spot in the middle of the room.

In my experience, they move the desks to the wall, and then huddle there among them. So invite them out into the scary "middle of the room."

Tell them this is a way of seeing who is here. So you would like them to group themselves according to certain important characteristics. You will ask a question, they should figure out their answers, and go stand with people who have the same answers they do. (Okay, these instructions are vague—but on purpose. They allow the group to have that moment of "a-ha" as they figure out what to do. Stay tuned.)

First question: You are ordering a single-topping pizza. What do you get?

There will be some awkward silence.

Then someone will shout "Sausage." Others will also shout "Sausage," and the Sausage people will all find one another. So will the Mushroom people. And the Cheese people, and the Onion people...

Encourage the groups to bunch together so you can see clearly where one group starts and another one ends.

Now, find out who is there. Walk around with confident hand gestures, saying "So in this group we have...what?" Cheese, they will answer, in stringy, whispery ways. (You'll work on that.) Sausage, the Sausage People will say. You get the idea.

Now, ask the next question: group yourself according to your favorite vegetable. They will mill around again, regroup, you will survey...and you will ask the next question.

The progression of questions: Start simple and funny. Good questions I use: Group yourselves according to...

...your favorite childhood cartoon.

...the number of siblings you have.



- ...what kind of hometown you come from—one-word description
- ...your favorite animal.
- ...your favorite thing to do with five bucks you find on the sidewalk.

Next, sequence to more specific questions. Group yourselves according to...

- ...How you describe yourself as a writer—one-word description.
- ...How you describe yourself as a speaker—one-word description.
- ...How you describe yourself as a reader—one-word description.
- ...How excited you are that you get to give speeches—one-word description.
- ...How excited you are that you get to write papers—one-word description.
- ...your biggest strength as a writer.
- ...thing you're still struggling with as a writer.
- ...your biggest strength as a speaker.
- ...thing you're still struggling with as a speaker.

If there is time, there are great difficult questions. Group yourselves according to...

- ...your passion.
 - ...the biggest strength you bring to this class.
 - ...the thing you're most confused about in your whole life.
- (inevitably, the biggest group for this one will be asking "How Does the Cambus Schedule Work?" It is always nice when some other students can answer these questions.)

Time: allow about 12-15 minutes, though the beauty of this one is you can make it longer or shorter.

Day 2:

Establish class guidelines: Ask students to describe their best and worst classroom experiences. From those, form a list of rules we all agree to play by in our class. Typical inclusions include Come prepared, Speak your Mind even if it's not crystal-clear, disagree **respectfully**....

Play the game: NOT A KNOT GAME (This one ties in beautifully with rhetoric in terms of analysis, mapping, and advocacy.)

Collect student contact information on notecards—names, e-mail, phone numbers on one side. On the other side, have them fill in this blank: "I'm the one who _____."

Not a Knot Game

Why? This game is actually tied to Rhetoric: it gives you a chance to see how your students make decisions, how they try to persuade other people, how group dynamics work. And never underestimate the impact of walking in with a rope in the first week of class.



Here is **how** the game works: while the students are doing a little writing (I have them filling out notecards, usually, with their contact information and stuff—see the notes for Day 2), you subtly place a wad of rope on the ground.

Place it so it is in a big snarl. Place it so it is loopy and confusing and tangled-looking. Try to do this quietly, so people do not watch you too closely. You could do it in the back of the room, I suppose.

Once the students are ready, have them move the desks and come look at the rope.

Without talking, or without touching the rope, they need to determine whether, if each end were grabbed and pulled back gently, there would be a knot in the rope or not. (They can get close and look...they just cannot touch anything.)

Still without talking: If they think there is a knot, they should stand on one side of the rope wad

If they think there is not a knot, they should stand on the other side. *Everybody has to pick one side. There is no spot for "I don't know."*

Once everybody is on one side or the other, tell them they can change sides at any point.

Now their job is to convince people on the other side to cross over and join them.

Your job: listen hard, noting the strategies of persuasion:

Some appeal to specific facts: look, this stretch here looks like a messy knot, but really, it is just some rope wrapped around some other rope...

Some appeal to outside knowledge: you know that no matter how carefully you put away things like extension cords and hoses, they always bunch themselves into a knot.

Some appeal to emotional reasons: look, the cool people are all over here, and you look like a "dweeb" standing there all by yourself.

Remind them again: they can change sides at any point. Once everybody is sure about where they are, you and a volunteer slowly pull on the ends of the rope. See what develops.

Again, they can still change sides. See who does: sometimes at the last minute, all the people who guessed wrong will jump over to the other side. That is interesting.

Sometimes all the people who guessed wrong will stand stock still, being Absolutely Wrong Together. That is interesting, too.

Processing: Two main fronts on which to process: what that exercise shows about various angles of persuasion, and (unbelievably enough) why rhetoric progresses the way it does.



Questions to ask for Front 1: Angles of Persuasion

What did you look at (or think about) when you were making your initial decision?

(The rope? The majority? Other experiences with tangled things you have had?)

Was anybody really not sure? How did those people choose a side?

What strategies do you remember people using during the persuasion part?

What strategies were most persuasive?

Why did you stick with the group you stuck with? (Especially if the incorrect group stuck on the “incorrect” side...what makes people continue to stick with an idea in the face of enormous counterevidence?)

Things to say about Front 2: Rhetoric

When you think about the process the class went through, you will notice eerie similarities to how your rhetoric education will be sequenced. **How, you may ask???** Well...

Step 1: you analyze things. In this exercise, you were looking at the rope. You were looking at other people’s decisions. Any time you look closely at the evidence that is there, you are analyzing.

Step 2: You were figuring out how other people’s decisions might affect yours, whether they have more or different expertise than you do, why they might be making their choices. Or you were figuring out how to roll in other info you have, such as “Things in a wad are almost always knotted up.” Figuring out how to juggle those different perspectives is similar to the act of mapping a controversy.

Step 3: I asked you to persuade the other side to come join you—so you were advocating for your own side, trying different approaches to get more people.

That is how rhetoric is taught in this class: we work first on analysis, looking closely at the rope—only instead of rope there are texts, pictures, films, speeches...

Then we look at mapping, thinking about how various points of view on issues are formed, who holds what knowledge, who values what.

Then we advocate...after we’re confident that our analysis is skillful and we’ve thought about the people involved in our issue, what motivates their stance, and how we might effectively reach them.

Time: this can fill 35 – 45 minutes, depending on how comfy you are with the processing, which is really where it is for this game.



Day 3:

On the board: list things you would like to know about your fellow students. (Hometown, favorite meal, how much they read or watch TV...) Then pair students up for ten minutes and have them interview each other, preparing to introduce your partner to everyone else. Be sure to include answers to those questions.

Introduce each other.

Diagnostic Writing: Describe yourself as a writer/speaker/reader —your strengths, what you would like to improve, how enthusiastic or unenthusiastic you are.... Have students write in class for the entire time. You will gather important information about their experiences and strengths, and you will get to see how those strengths and needs are demonstrated.

Day 4:

Scenarios Activity

This activity will require students to focus on AUDIENCE and the importance of knowing your audience in an effort to be the most effective in the designing and drafting of the skit.

Procedures:

Have the students will break up into groups, wrote brief skits and performed them, enacting the scenarios.

Explain to them that they will be using their knowledge of the basic appeals and the importance of audience in creating several brief skits.

Next, introduce the following scenarios.

Scenario #1

Tell the students to imagine that they have gotten into an accident with their grandma's car. It is one of those cases where it was not 100% your fault, but you could have been more careful. Write a narrative of the events for the following audience:

- your grandma
- your best friend
- the cop who has arrived on the scene
- for yourself (i.e. in your journal)



Scenario #2

You have just put down the security deposit and first month's rent on a new house. You have heard some strange things about this place. It belonged to a crazy old music teacher who murdered her pupils when they had not practiced. Legend has it that you can hear the sounds of a child practicing the same song over and over again, as if he or she were struggling to "get it right." You are investigating the place when you yourself hear the sounds of a piano coming from the basement. You freeze. Your blood runs cold as you feel a sudden draft on your neck even though it is a hot summer's day. As you run from the house, you decide you do not want to rent this house and are willing to "suck up" the money you have put down. How do you chronicle this story for:

- your would-be housemate
- the landlord (MAYBE you'll get your money back)
- your significant other (who's always thought you were a bit daft)
- your parents
- The students will share their writings with one another and discuss who had the best narrative for each scenario.

Day 5

Ads Activity

Standards Covered:

W.11-12.1a-c

W.11-12.2a, d

W.11-12.4-5

L.11-12.1-3

This activity asks students to make appeals based on logos, ethos, and pathos. You might lead into this exercise by spending time analyzing newspaper/magazine ads in the classroom. Ask your students to analyze the print ads in terms of the rhetorical triangle and pathos, ethos, and logos. (this would also incorporate some of the Reading for Informational Text Standards).



For this activity, you will write your own advertisement for radio or TV. In it, you will make use of at least 2 appeals. The product or service you advertise can be a real one, or one that you've conjured up in your own imagination. Perhaps you've wished such a product or service existed to ease the pains of your everyday existence. The minimum requirement for this assignment is one typed page.

In class on [date], you will each be presenting your advertisement to the class, incorporating the hallmarks of good delivery. Please feel free to be as creative as you wish. Your ad can be completely outlandish. Use props if you'd like! This should be a fun assignment that you all can use to blow off some steam as long as you keep it appropriate.