HOW TO WRITE A CONCISE BOOK REPORT, OR PLEASE DO NOT COPY FROM THE JACKET COVER, JOHNNY

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Haven't students told us that they hate to write book reports? And, might I add, haven't we teachers told ourselves that we hate to read them?

We have used creative ideas for presenting oral book reports, ideas which have worked very well, have been fun to do, have allowed our students opportunities to be innovative and creative, and have been appealing to both the students and the teacher. But, how can we make the *written* book report more meaningful to our students, more exciting to read, and not just another repetitive exercise in the "what happens next" jungle?

To begin with, we should investigate what kind of literature appeals to our students. The protagonist who is believable to contemporary children is a contemporary child. Most of my eighth grade students are reading Judy Blume, S. E. Hinton, Paul Zindel, with Ray Bradbury, Richard Cormier, and Tolkein not far behind. Problems which seem contemporary and relevant to contemporary children are not new but are perhaps more widespread. We have children on drugs, children with alcoholic parents, alcoholic children.

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We have runaways, teenage parents, and child abuse. We have suicide, rape, abortion. We have brainwashed children joining strange and bizarre cults. Perhaps now, however, we are more willing to look at the problems, to face up to them. Although we have always had these problems, little Teresa used to wait outside in the snow while, in the tavern, drunken old Dad drank away the grocery money. Little Teresa did not go to Alateen and learn for herself how to cope with the problem.

The list could go on. Doesn't it make the teacher long for the supposed good old days when all readers had to worry about was whether Laura and her family would enjoy living in the Little House in the Big Woods as much as in the Little House on the Prairie? But like it or not, life has changed; our students face the problems described above. Closing our eyes does not make problems disappear. And, there is the rationale that if a child knows that another child has the same problem, this knowledge may make it easier to handle. It may make him or her say that "I can handle mine just as Jody did in the book."

S. E. Hinton articulated the importance of this idea when he said, "Teenagers know a lot today. Not just things out of a text book, but about living. They know their parents aren't superhuman, they know that persons aren't safe from corruption, that some people will sell out. Writers needn't be afraid that they will shock their teenage audience. But give them something to hang on to. Show that people don't sell out, and that everyone can't be bought."

To help students understand their problems, discover the underlying values from which the problems evolve, and evaluate methods of coping, teachers must emphasize certain skills. As teachers we must begin to rethink how we can teach students to read more critically, to search beneath the surface of the book, to evaluate pervasive values and aspirations, to help them draw parallels between the book and other media that treat these themes. Assuming that we want to develop critical readers and thinkers, we need to help our students consider the plot, message, and method of the book. We need to help students look at characters in the book and at the underlying purposes of the author in creation of those characters. When we analyze these concerns, we are fulfilling a main role as teachers: to develop students who can critically examine our culture's covert as well as overt assumptions.

Let us get on then with writing a short yet comprehensive book report. Students should strive to do four things in a good book report: classify, interpret, analyze, and evaluate. Practicing these four skills when dealing with literature develops critical readers. Books then have relevance; books then become more meaningful to each student.

Classifying is the process of sorting things into groups according to their common qualities. Classification, recognized by Aristotle as a natural process of the mind, can be honed as a vital tool for mental organization. By developing this skill, students become aware of the kinds or types; they develop a generalization skill. The teacher directs the students' thinking by asking them to respond to questions like, "From the reading selection list some of the problems Ann and Johnny would have to face and solve in order to be successful in the city. Where would they live? What kind of clothes and furniture would they need? What about their social life? What kind of jobs, what kind of training would they need? Describe the problems in detail and then list other problems that they might have . . . What kinds of problems do Mr. and Mrs. BoJo Jones have? List Tony's problems in *Then Again Maybe I Won't.* What kind of problems do Maggie and Liz have in *My Darling, My Hamburger?* What are the problems of living in a prep school like in Cormier's *The Chocolate War?* What are some of the perils of a family hiding under a false identity like in *I Am The Cheese?*"

The teacher can direct classification techniques for any book. Training in classification is essential to the development of a student's ability to solve problems and to deal with unfamiliar material, a skill useful in making inferences.

Another process crucial to developing critical thinking through reading is interpretation. Interpretation stresses the student's understanding of basic ideas. It asks him to explain an aspect of the book in his own words, to paraphrase, to make comparisons and contrasts. For example, questions like "Explain why Montag stole a book from the old lady's house in *Fahrenheit 451,* or explain why the teenage terrorist is attracted to the pretty teenage girl bus driver in *After The First Death,* by Cormier," call upon the student's interpretative skill.

Analysis, the process of becoming aware of the relationship of the components of a thing to its whole, is the third skill crucial to the developing reader. Part-whole relation-

ships are the basis for the analytic skill called structural analysis. The counterpart of this is operational analysis, the process of becoming aware of the relationship between an event, operation, or transformation and its constituent stages and substages. To teach this process, teachers use questions like "Make a chronological log of the story. What are the ten most important happenings in the story in sequence? How are Montag and Clarisse alike? How are they different?"

Finally, evaluation involves the students' abilities to make judgments and decisions. This concept gives each an opportunity to be the judge or decision-maker, to make value judgments, to make decisions about the consequences of an event or situation. Questions like "What if Julie didn't tell Bo Jo about her condition? What if Maggie told Liz's mom about Liz's pregnancy?" help focus the students' attention on making necessary judgments.

When students begin their written book reports, I tell them it is not necessary to begin like any other popular writing with phrasing calculated to elicit attention, to catch the eye. In fact, I suggest they start with a simple statement, "I wish to review." As guidelines for completing the report, I offer the following questions and statements:

1. Identify the book, author, and type.
2. Which event will you remember the longest? Why?
3. What was the author's main purpose for writing this book?
4. What is (are) the main conflict(s) in this book . . . is it (or are they) resolved . . . if so, how?
5. How does the book relate to modern day living and/or your life?
6. How did you benefit from reading this book?

As an eighth grader, Kim Oberlin wrote this book report. She revised it once.

I wish to review *Anne of Green Gables* which was written by L. M. Montgomery. This book is a fictional novel.

The event that I shall remember the longest is when Matthew Cuthbert, Anne's stepfather dies. It was so sad! I really became involved with the people in this book. They seemed so real and alive that when Matthew died, I could

feel the pain, the hurt, and the sadness that Marilla, Matthew's wife and Anne shared.

I believe L. M. Montgomery's main purpose for writing this book was to show the love and beautifulness of the world through a child's eyes, who never had any parents that she could remember, never anyone she could call her "ma" and "pa," until two very special people came along. I benefited from this book by gaining a new friend. Anne is certainly a girl that no one can hate. But there is one thing wrong with her . . . she has the worst temper which matches her red-hot hair.

There were many problems in this book — some very funny and some very serious. One problem was that Anne thought herself as a red-headed, skinny, homely little girl. She thought about this night and day. Her solution was to try to think about how pretty she was on the inside and to think of how lucky she is to have had Marilla and Matthew as her adopted parents. If people these days could do that — think of the pretty things inside of them rather than the outside, we'd have a much better world to live in.

This book is truly the best book that I have read for a long time.

I believe this example is the kind of relevant reporting that is meaningful to my students, and the kind that I, the teacher, really enjoy reading.