

HOW TO TEACH ENGLISH COMPOSITION *(AT ALMOST ANY LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT)* IN 33 STEPS



By **TOM DURWOOD**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MOCARAN

How many of us actually require our students to analyze material in an in-depth way? How many of us require them to draw inferences, make connections, reach and defend conclusions?

Our liberal-arts courses are the ideal places to teach those cognitive skills that students need to be successful in the workplace. In fact, teaching that kind of deep thinking should be the hallmark of every liberal-arts course. That's what liberal-arts courses do best.

-- Rob Jenkins, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 6, 2011)

Copyright © 2018 Tom Durwood. All rights reserved.

Original illustrations copyright © 2018 M. Mocaran.

The 1961 Report of the Register of Copyrights on the General Revision of the U.S. Copyright Law cites examples of activities that courts have regarded as fair use: quotation of excerpts in a review or criticism for purposes of illustration or comment; quotation of short passages in a scholarly or technical work, for illustration or clarification of the author's observations; ... reproduction by a teacher or student of a small part of a work to illustrate a lesson.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Fellow Teachers –

I had the pleasure of teaching English Composition at Valley Forge Military College. Like so many schools, we taught an impossibly wide range of students in our classrooms -- from remedial cadets with limited reading and writing skills to high-speed sophomores on their way to West Point.

Our cadets were always tired from their military duties. In these highly challenging, highly rewarding classrooms, we devised our own methods to teach our students.

Here I have collected the lesson plans that worked.

A resentful, low-attention-span class with such diverse skills is a challenge. It rewards a flexible plan of attack – a teacher armed with different ways to surprise and engage the students. You will find more of my lesson plans on my site:

WWW.GOODSHERPA.COM and on Teachers Pay Teachers.

WARNING: THIS IS ALTERNATIVE TEACHING

My teaching style is not right for everyone. My approach is predicated on teaching that emphasizes real-world critical thinking and tons of practice writing. I was lucky to have a Dean who encouraged my outside-the-box approach to student writing and student engagement.

In particular, if your department adheres closely to guidelines for Common Core or Composition and Rhetoric, these lesson plans will be difficult to fit into your syllabus.

Make your students think. Surprise them. Teach the real world and all the mechanics will follow.

Good luck in your classroom! I hope you will find some of this material helpful.

All best,
Tom Durwood

CONTENTS

- | | |
|---|----------|
| 1. Establish Your Mission | p. 11-10 |
| 2. You Do NOT Need to be Sidney Poitier (or Hilary Swank) | p. 12-13 |
| 3. Use Content to Teach Form | p. 14-15 |
| 4. Constant Writing | p. 16-17 |
| 5. Let Students Learn Grammar Online at Their Own Pace | p. 18-19 |
| 6. Choose a Good Textbook and Augment with Your Own Lessons | p. 20-21 |
| 7. Help Explain the World | p. 22-23 |
| 8. You Are a Sherpa | p. 24-25 |
| 9. Simplicity | p. 26-27 |
| 10. Surprise Them | p. 28-29 |
| 11. Assign This | p. 30-31 |
| 12. Ask them to write about their own lives | p. 32-33 |
| 13. Fanatical Focus on Mechanics Once a Week | p. 34-35 |
| 14. Review a Rough Draft of What You Expect | p. 36-37 |
| 15. Bite-sized Challenges | p. 38-39 |
| 16. Lavish attention on a graded paper in the first week | p. 40-41 |
| 17. Warm Students to a Topic Before Assigning | p. 42-43 |
| 18. They Like Gender | p. 44-45 |
| 19. Teach Culture Clash | p. 46-47 |
| 20. Teach Science and Technology | p. 48-49 |
| 21. Teach Verbal Math Problems | p. 50-51 |
| 22. Listen | p. 52-53 |
| 23. Use Birth Order in a Lesson Plan | p. 54-55 |
| 24. Remind Them Where They Are in Life | p. 56-57 |
| 25. Record Student Presentations with Your Cell Phone | p. 58-59 |
| 26. Describe a Process | p. 60-61 |
| 27. A Poem Every Third Day | p. 62-63 |
| 28. Scaffold | p. 64-65 |
| 29. Use Geography with Everything | p. 66-67 |
| 30. Timelines | p. 68-69 |
| 31. Weekly Outlining | p. 70-71 |
| 32. Include Money in Your Lesson Plans | p. 72-73 |
| 33. Assess the Class's Progress and Include Them in the Assessment Process | p. 74-75 |



HOW TO TEACH ENGLISH COMPOSITION (AT ALMOST ANY LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT) IN 33 STEPS

By **TOM DURWOOD**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MOCARAN

At institutions like Hamline University and LaGuardia Community College, liberal arts means not only a course of study featuring a rich mix of disciplines in the arts and sciences, but also an education that emphasizes skills such as complex problem solving and requirements that students learn to apply classroom curricula to real-world experiences.

"Saving the Life of the Mind," by Goldie Blumenstyk, Inside Higher Ed Feb. 28, 2010)

1

ESTABLISH YOUR MISSION

The first rule of war is “Mission.” The army that has a clear and realistic mission has the best chance for success.

That is also the first rule of teaching.

If the class buys into the common mission of collective preparation for the students’ success, you are good every day. If not, you’re cooked.

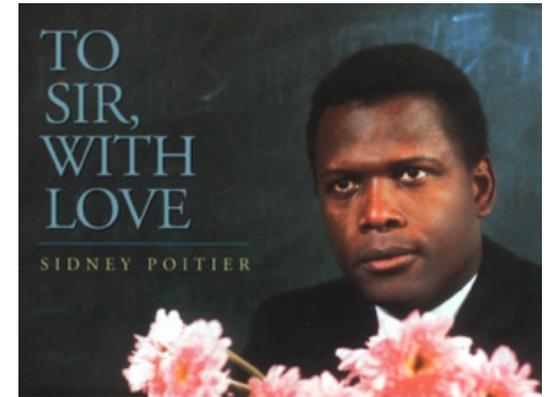
This is a daily process of reminding the students why we’re together, and how our common success will bring good things to their futures and their families.



2

YOU DO NOT NEED TO BE SIDNEY POITIER

(at least not every day)



In the 1967 film "To Sir With Love," Sidney Poitier played a hero teacher who personally transformed a group of rag-tag London street kids into self-aware ladies and gentlemen. They sang a song to him.

Not a useful role model for you and me.

If you feel the pressure to be magical every minute of every class ... forget it.

You and I are more like Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski: Coach K has a set of note cards with different drills on it. Every 20 minutes he switches drills. He has a system for teaching basketball.

You and I have a system for teaching English. The system carries the load, not our magical personalities.

3

USE CONTENT TO TEACH FORM

Students will not learn grammar if you teach it this way:

Open your book to page 17, The Proper Use of Semi-Colon. Let's read what it says.

Students will learn grammar if you teach it this way:

Here is a wonderful sentence from Alexis' essay on birth order:

My brother gets all the breaks; a dog; no chores; I'll bet he even gets a car for graduation

What's wrong with this sentence?

Why is it wrong?

You are teaching the same thing – the material and your explanation is the same – but you embed the grammar in the mission (which is to be able to write an A essay on any topic).

4

CONSTANT WRITING

I wouldn't answer just going
over the sea and the sky I was
of so many things but didn't
Mulvey and Mr Stanhope and
father and old captain Groves
Blameda gardens and Gibraltar
girl where I was a flower of the
and how he kissed me under the
wall and I thought well as well
another and then I asked him
eyes to ask again and then he
would I to say yes my mount
and first I put my arms around
and drew him down to me so he
feel my breasts all perfume and
I will yes.

The Brockton miracle occurred in 2004 when a Massachusetts high school (a school that was about to get shut down for low test scores) required its students to write a brief essay after everything – lunch, gym, study hall, assembly, everything. The subject did not matter, only the constant writing.

Scores went up across the board (even Math and Science). Students smarter. School saved. Constant writing works.

5

LET THEM LEARN GRAMMAR ONLINE AT THEIR OWN PACE

There are a number of web sites that generate excellent grammar self-tests and explain-as-you-go exercises. In this age of Salman Khan, students prefer and expect a component of DIY learning.

You can still teach it in-class. Once you give a quiz and explain the answers, you can assign online work on specific topics.

Figure 5:

Subject	Verb	Object
adjective	adverb	adjective