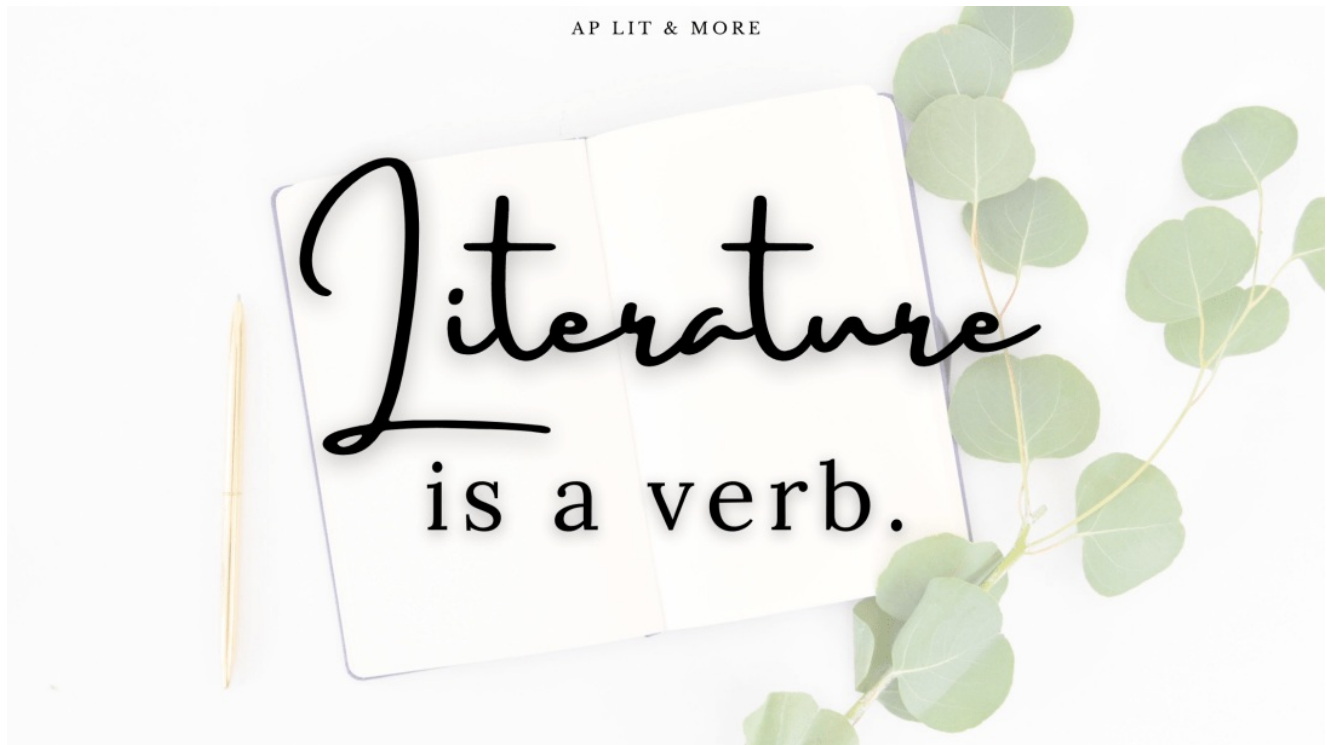


Literature is a Verb – An Introductory Lesson

 aplitandmore.com/2020/08/12/literature-is-a-verb

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I write this as I muse upon last night's Mosaic professional development session with David Miller. Like the rest of the crowd, I found David's message and way of speaking calming and invigorating at the same time. The presentation had a profound effect on me, breaking through the barrier that had built up over five months of unrest, anxiety, and uncertainty. David Miller said one thing that seemed to affect his listeners the most:

Literature is a verb.

David Miller

Before he was even finished, I began planning out an activity that I hoped would intrigue new students and cultivate the idea that ***literary analysis is a journey, not a skill.*** In normal days I would have planned this as a gallery walk, but instead I focused on a lesson that could be done in a classroom with social distancing, or virtually (both synchronously and asynchronously). I'm happy to be able to share it with you.

Step 1 – Lesson Prep

The prep for this lesson isn't difficult. You simply select 4-8 selections of literature and prepare them to be printed or posted to your students. **I have an editable example made for download, [here](#).** For my lesson, I have chosen the following pieces of literature:

1. Poem – “what the cicada said to the black boy” by Clint Smith
2. Novel excerpt – *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman
3. Poem – “Warning” by Jenny Joseph
4. Nonfiction excerpt – *Barracoon* by Zora Neale Hurston
5. Poem – “Follower” by Seamus Heaney
6. Novel excerpt – *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

Step 2 – Reading the Excerpts



[Check out this blog post to see some other activities I integrate in the first few weeks of AP Lit](#)

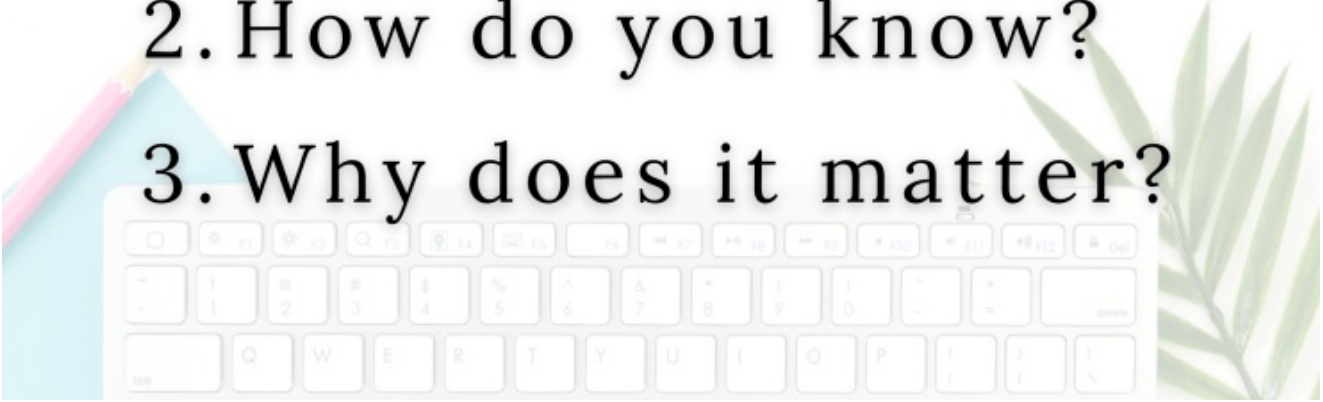
To begin the lesson, distribute your excerpts randomly among your students. If teaching in person, hand out the poems evenly and indiscriminately to your students. If teaching virtually, assign them in a random order. Students are given simple tasks:

Examine your excerpt. Then, respond as best as you can to the following questions:

1. What does it mean?
2. How do you know?
3. Why does it matter?

(Thank you to the member from Mosaic who put these simplified questions in the chat. I didn't catch your name, but they were perfect)

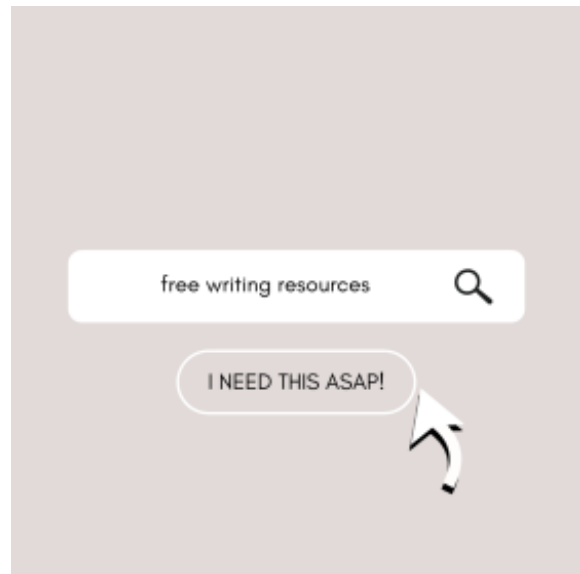
Encourage students to annotate their texts and prepare answers to each question. If this is happening in class, five minutes should be enough time for each student to prepare a perfunctory answer.

1. What does it mean?
 2. How do you know?
 3. Why does it matter?
- 

Step 3 – Literature is a Verb

In class, ask all students who have excerpt 1 to stand in place. After reading the piece aloud (or playing a performance), ask each student to share his or her reflections on the three questions. Encourage alternative answers, even opening it up to the rest of the class. If possible, highlight a line or phrase from the text and ask them to process questions 1, 2, and 3 just for that line. Continue with the second text, gathering responses from those students, and so on through all of the excerpts.

To hammer home the “literature is a verb” concept, students need to understand that analysis of literature is not a black and white process. Above all, seek interpretation rather than one right answer. The role of the teacher here would be to provide context info for the text when requested or needed. Otherwise just guide, push, and expand on students’ answers. They may be hesitant to participate at first, but as questions and theories are accepted and celebrated, more will begin to feel creative and start thinking outside the box. However, the beauty of question 2 (how do you know?) will keep the theories grounded. They’ll soon learn that interpretations are welcome, but must be supported by the text to stand at all.



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Why does it matter?

Question 3 (why does it matter?) is ultimately the most important. This is the question that links literature to purpose and emotions, usually by connecting it to social movements and personal feelings. On the surface, only one of my chosen texts directly alludes to a political or social movement. However, upon digging deeper into all of the texts, profound statements on social norms and emotions are present:

- Clint Smith’s poem discusses feelings of oppression and police hostility. This poem is the most explicit in the “why does it matter” discussion.
- Eleanor Oliphant is struggling with ghosts in her past and a deep, decades-long struggle with depression and mental illness.
- “Warning” discusses social norms and expectations, and a hidden delight in breaking them.
- Hurston’s *Barracoon* is an emotional anthropological study of identity and freedom, from the perspective of one of the last people to be enslaved and shipped to America.
- Heaney’s “Follower” delicately examines a shifting balance in aging generations, as a son becomes the caregiver to his father.
- And the unspoken conflicts from *Pride and Prejudice* discuss the social and gender norms of the 19th century. Plus Darcy’s willingness to comment on them outright says even more.

In discussing literature as a verb, David Miller explained that it needs to be practiced. He also said:

Literature is more caught than taught.

David Miller

The importance in doing any of this is to emphasize the discussion, the insight, and the exploration of literature. We are not giving them tools that help illuminate “the one and only right answer.” Instead, we are trying to cultivate tools that help them read actively, find evidence, and explore meaning in text and in life.

Virtual modification

If this is being done virtually, the lesson can continue unmodified if it is a live, synchronous lesson. If this is a recorded or asynchronous lesson, these questions can be moved to a discussion forum or virtual website like Flipgrid.

Application

I have two intentions to follow up this lesson. The first is that I intend to close the lesson explaining that “literature is a verb” is a lifestyle. Too often I have students who take AP Lit and expect to walk out of class earning a 5 based on my instruction alone. I want them to learn that high-scoring students are not only strong writers, but they are **readers**. If they want to learn more, than they need to live out literature **as a verb**.

My other intention is to continue the lesson as a homework assignment. I could invite each student to choose an excerpt (as they were assigned one the first time). They would then continue answering questions for 1, 2, and 3, modeling the practice we experienced in class. The other option is to allow students to choose their own excerpt and apply 1, 2, and 3 to it. I think I am going to go this route and ask them to find an excerpt from their summer reading (a choice novel from a cultivated list) to practice on.

How did you know what parts to *underline?*

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to reflect on one more moment from David Miller's presentation. He shared how he passed along one of his novels from college to his mother. When his mother approached, book in hand, she startled him with an intriguing question. She said, "I see that you've underlined parts of this book. How did you know what parts to underline?"

That story resonated so much with me personally. I come from a very logically-oriented family. My father is a reader but not a sharer, and my mom and brother don't read for pleasure. My husband, while an occasional reader, is an accountant. He and I live in different worlds when it comes to books. I love these people, but they don't understand how I "see" when I read. I've even had a co-worker, a fellow English teacher, ask me this question. She put it this way, "how do you know where the analysis is?" I realized that this person had never been given the chance to love literature, to explore it and to apply it. This ability to read and underline is something that many of us take for granted. Perhaps this lesson, and David Miller's insights in general, can help us guide those readers who are simply looking for the parts to underline.



I am a full time high school English teacher and Writing Center coordinator at a K-12 school in Minnesota. I specialize in forming creative lesson plans, engaging students in real-world, meaningful lessons, and creating meaningful and effective assessments rather than busywork. I also have a Teachers Pay Teachers store, where I specialize in literature and writing resources. [View all posts by aplitandmore](#)