

What is the approach to developing a curriculum focused on social injustice?

Culminating Experience Curriculum Design: Social Injustice and the Role of the Individual

Curriculum and Instruction in Secondary English

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Abstract

Social Injustice and the Role of the Individual is a unit developed for 12<sup>th</sup> grade students at XXXX High School. The unit focuses on introducing students to the social injustices that plague society and the role of the individual in combating these injustices. Students explore how democratic conversations and discussions can broaden their understanding of a particular concept and how a well-constructed argument can lead to social change. The unit is designed to ensure that student experience and real world application of the skills developed throughout the duration of the unit are the fundamental components. Through collaboration and research students develop practical solutions to fight injustice and deepen their understanding of their community. This paper explores strategies and practices that empower students to take ownership of their learning and the theories and philosophies that support the design.

### **Unit Outline**

My unit will allow my students to explore two texts, an article entitled “The Most Dangerous States in America,” published by “usatoday.com,” and a piece by former prisoner Wilbert Rideau, “Why Prisons Don’t Work.” The two texts will offer students a journalistic perspective of the evaluation of danger in the state of Nevada and an opinion piece by a former prisoner about the injustices and ineffectiveness of the prison system. The in-depth study and analysis of the two texts will enable students to explore the injustices they witness in their own communities and work as a cohesive unit to propose alternate solutions to combat those injustices.

For my curriculum unit I have aligned my goals for my students with the following Common Core State Standards:

RI.11-12.5

Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

W.11-12.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

SL.11-12.1b

Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

SL.11-12.1c

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

The five day unit will serve as a forum of exploration and collaboration where students will analyze articles, study the author’s structure and choice in delivering arguments, utilize

personal experience to inform their own understandings of injustice and work with peers to propose alternate solutions modeled after the texts studied. The unit will consist of a reading component, writing component and speaking component.

### *Curricular and Instructional Goals and Objectives*

Students will study the texts and evaluate the structure of “Why Prisons Don’t Work,” and evaluate how the structure influences the strength and effectiveness of the arguments. The students’ evaluation of the structure will translate into their own informative and explanatory texts about an injustice they are aware of in their community and the development of a solution to combat the injustice. The students will master the skills of understanding how structure influences the strength of an argument. They can use this skill outside of class to write letters to congressmen, local officials and others who are in control of whatever issue the students may be addressing. This real world application will be useful in almost any setting. It will benefit the students inside and outside of the classroom.

### *Essential Knowledge*

There are key skills and essential knowledge that my students will take away at the conclusion of the unit. First and foremost, students will be able to understand how structure influences the strength of an argument. Students will analyze a strong argument and analyze the author’s techniques and choices in presenting an argument. Students will annotate the text and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the argument. The text will be analyzed both individually and in a small group. Students will then take this skill and apply it to a real world situation. They will identify a social injustice in their community and write an informative/explanatory text about the injustice.

The most challenging component of the lesson is collaborating with peers to propose a solution to combat the injustice. Students will develop their discussion skills and speaking skills in this portion of the lesson which is a daunting task for many. Ultimately, students will be well-informed agents of social change in whatever capacity they choose.

### *Unit Breakdown*

#### 1. Annotation and Exploration

##### a. Curricular and Instructional Goals and Objectives

- Students will be able to analyze the article “Why Prisons Don’t Work”.
- Students will be able to identify how the author utilized structure to strengthen his argument.

##### b. Activities/Experiences for Students

- Students will read the “usatoday.com” article entitled, “The Most Dangerous States in America.” Through open discussion and analysis, students will understand the criteria considered in evaluating the crime in the state of Nevada and ranking it the second most dangerous state.
- Students will use the information from the article to inform their study of the article, “Why Prisons Don’t Work.”
- Students will get into small groups of three and read through the article once in its entirety. Students use annotation techniques that they have developed in class to break down the text and evaluate each paragraph separately.
  - Each student will have a distinct role in the process:
    - Student 1 will define any unfamiliar terms or concepts,
    - Student 2 will record any questions that may arise from the reading
    - Student 3 will be responsible for summarizing the main point from each paragraph. (The analysis tasks should lead students to understand how the author is constructing his argument.)

##### c. Materials

- Copies of Articles, Highlighters, Pen/Pencil, Notebooks

##### d. Assessment Tools - Constructed Response

1. What does the author argue in his article? Use textual evidence to support your answer?
2. How does the author open up the article versus how he concludes?
3. Where you convinced by the author’s rationale? Why or Why not?  
(see Appendix A)

#### 2. Class Dialogue

##### a. Curricular and Instructional Goals and Objectives

- Students will be able to synthesize information in the text to determine how the author structures his article to present an argument.
- Students will be able to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of an argument with their peers and support their claims with textual evidence.

- Students will be able to relay information from a text to another party in the form of an explanatory and informative text lacking any form of bias.
- b. Activities/Experiences for Students
- Students consider question, “Does the prison system work?” The question can only be answered using the article that they read the previous day. They cannot draw from any personal knowledge of the subject matter nor can they address any other sources. This practice will force students to utilize the information in the article to justify their claim about the prison system.
- Students will voice their opinions for the first half of class using the article as evidence. This portion of the discussion will conclude and students will then be able to voice their own opinions, no longer limited by the information in the text.
- Students consider classmates’ points of view and use that to inform opinions about whether or not the prison system works.
- c. Materials
- Copies of Articles, Highlighters, Pen/Pencil, Notebooks
- d. Assessment
- Students will be asked to write a paragraph answering the same question that was posed at the start of the lesson, “Does the prison system work?”. The response will assess the students’ ability to synthesize information from the text and information from the class discussion. 3 Point Grading Rubric will be used. (See Appendix B)

### 3. Social Injustice

- a. Curricular and Instructional Goals and Objectives
- Students will be able to identify a social injustice in the local community recognized as an injustice by peers
- Students will be able to identify the root causes of the injustice
- Students will be able to draft an explanatory/informative text explaining the injustice in the community
- b. Activities/Experiences for Students
- Students work in groups of three that they met with on the first day of the unit and identify a social injustice in their immediate community.
- For this portion of the activity they will investigate three criteria: What social injustice have they witnessed in their community, what are the root causes of the social injustices, what has been done to combat the issue?
- Students access the ipads to conduct research on the injustice they are investigating. They will then consolidate their research.
- c. Materials
- Articles, Notebooks, Ipad
- d. Assessment
- Students will be able to work in their groups of three to “Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately information about the injustice that they have investigated and discussed in their groups. The Proficiency 6 point Rubric will be utilized, as it is a good measure of informative and explanatory texts. (See appendix c)

#### 4. The Solution

##### a. Curricular and Instructional Goals and Objectives

- Students will be able to identify and create a solution with their peers to combat the social injustice identified in previous lesson.
- Students will generate civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, prepare clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

##### b. Activities/Experiences for Students

- Students will collaborate to create a solution to combat the social injustice that they have identified.
- Their solution will address the following questions:
  - What is the name of your proposal?
  - What injustice are you fighting?
  - How will your solution combat the injustice?
  - How will you earn the support of local politicians to buy into your proposal?
  - Why is it important to address the injustice that you have described?
  - How will you fund your endeavor?Students create a two minute pitch addressing the questions listed.

##### c. Materials

Articles, Notebooks, Research Findings, Research Scaffold

##### d. Assessment

- In an effort to identify how well students can problem solve, they will all be introduced to an entirely new injustice and they will have to answer each one of the questions they answered for their group work. Because the assessment questions focus a great deal on “how” the key objectives of identifying, generating and preparing a solution will all be assessed. Each question will require a single sentence response.

#### 5. The Pitch

##### a. Curricular and Instructional Goals and Objectives

- Students will be able to present a two minute pitch on a topic previously researched.
- Students will be able to propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

##### b. Activities/Experiences for Students

- Each group will have 2 minutes to present their pitch prepared the previous class period.
- Once the presentation is over, the floor will be opened up for questions. There will be a one minute question session where students in the audience can address any points of weakness in the proposal or question the validity of any aspect of the presentation.

##### c. Materials

- Presentation Materials (PowerPoint, Poster Board...)

##### d. Assessment

- The presenters will be judged on the following criteria

- Questions were answered thoroughly
- The injustice was outlined appropriately
- The solution was creative and practical
- Everyone in the group had an equal opportunity to speak
- The questions that were asked of the group were answered professionally and adequately
- The students completed the presentation within the two minutes.

### **Analysis of Unit**

#### *Student Demographic*

XXXXs High School is located in North Las Vegas in the Clark County School District. The school serves a predominantly Hispanic and African-American student population. As of the 2011-2012 school year, the demographic population of the school consisted of 55.4% Hispanic, 31.4% African-American, 5.8% White and 2.9% Asian (Nevada Department of Education, 2012). There is also a small population of multi-race students. Of the 2,600 students enrolled at XXXX, 47.8% are male and 52.2% are female and 11.3% of the students receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) while 76.9% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch (Nevada Department of Education, 2012). Further, for the 2011-2012 school year, XXXXX served an ELL population of approximately 11.5%, yet this number has continued to increase as indicated by impacted sheltered ELL courses and a decreasing amount of resources to serve this growing population of students (Nevada Department of Education, 2012).

As a teacher of seniors, it is important to consider the demographics of the graduating class. The class of 2011 graduated 47.9% of the seniors, of which 42.1% were male and 52.2% were female (Nevada Department of Education, 2012). Of the 47.9% who graduated, 43.1% were Hispanic and 46.4% were African-American. (Nevada Department of Education, 2012). With graduation rates tip-toeing around the 50% mark, it is vital to equip my students with the



tools necessary to navigate their final year of high school and meet the graduation requirements. Serving a predominantly Hispanic and African-American student population, it is important to consider their cultural diversity and identity when planning a unit. Examples that allow for text-to-self connections have proven to leave a lasting impression on students beyond their high school career. When planning the unit of identity and global injustice, I will present articles and literature that enables students to question and explore self while developing and refining the academic skills outlined in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) along with the requirements in the state of Nevada (i.e. Nevada Proficiency Exams). A career and college ready student, as defined by one of the Common Core anchor standards, is one who, “actively seek[s] to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively” (corestandards.org).

Teaching seniors presents a unique set of challenges that could potentially hinder the progress of the students. In a class of 12<sup>th</sup> graders, I have students who are performing at grade level while others are reading below a sixth-grade level. Differentiation and scaffolding are key components of the unit design that will help alleviate many of these issues. Further, many of the seniors are eighteen years of age which provides them with certain privileges that also interfere with their growth as socially and academically prepared graduates. They are able to sign out of school at their discretion, and many of them work a number of jobs to supplement their family income. Therefore, a unit that is appealing and engaging is necessary in order to justify to the students why the content and practice are important to them now and beyond their high school years.

*School Context/Culture*

XXXX is in its second year of turnaround. A number of goals have been established around increasing the number of juniors proficient in the areas of math and English. The goals surrounding the seniors relate to increasing graduation numbers. Instructing at a turnaround school presents challenges and also creates unique opportunities to increase student performance. A number of interventions have been put in place to provide students with extra academic help in the form of tutoring and other programs. Teachers are allotted time to collaborate and plan, and there is a strong push to use data to evaluate areas of growth and areas of weakness.

Unfortunately, despite gains made in the school both academically and culturally, there are still a number of issues plaguing the campus. Truancy and transiency rates still continue to exist despite efforts made to reduce the numbers. In the 2011-2012 school year, transiency rates were at 33.5% and there were 59 students habitually truant (Nevada Department of Education, 2012). These are the cases that were reported. Efforts have been put in place to combat the issues.

As far as the campus culture is concerned, a new mission has been drafted and communication between the administration and teachers improved drastically. School assemblies and clubs celebrate student accomplishments and diversity. Many of the teachers have embraced the idea of collaboration and the use of data to inform instruction. There are still a few naysayers and critics, but overall, the campus culture is slowly developing into a strong one.

There seems to be an emphasis on passing the proficiencies which has taken time away from the engaging content. The administration wants to see the students pass their exams and graduate, but teachers must ensure that we are not sending them off to a life beyond high school ill-prepared.

*Curriculum & Instruction*

Although ambiguous, the definition of curriculum that I have found most closely captures my understanding of the term is, a plan developed by educators that incorporates the experiences of students to solidify understanding. Allan Ornstein and Francis Hunkins (2013) define curriculum as, “a plan for achieving goals” (p. 8). This position was popularized by Tyler and Taba. So much time and effort is spent on understanding the cognitive development of students and the best approaches to instruction. Many factors are considered and countless hours are spent planning curriculum. Therefore, it would only be fair to define curriculum as a plan to achieve goals. Education is by no means an impeccable institution. In fact, the institution of education is flawed by misunderstandings and bureaucratic hoopla. Amidst the chaos, there needs to be some form of a plan to provide direction to the students and the teacher. Curriculum is a blueprint of how collectively, the individuals involved, will reach a goal. Lacking a plan creates a disjointed system that will not function properly.

Yet, a plan that is implemented without considering the population which it has been created for is obsolete. That is why curriculum is also defined as “dealing with the learner’s experiences” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013, p. 8). I serve a diverse population of students with diverse needs and diverse experiences. The majority of my students are seniors who are at the cusp of graduation. Their experiences are vital components of my curriculum. I firmly believe that understanding self and developing an identity within the classroom are essential in creating a culture that cultivates learning. If my students do not integrate themselves into the culture of the classroom, then the planned curriculum will fail.

A plan that incorporates experience will result in true learning. My unit will focus on teaching skills that are essential to the growth and development of every single one of my

students. The practical implementation of the skills acquired will be a product of a curriculum that is infused with personal experience.

*Model of Curriculum Development Used*

A phrase that is discussed in seminars, professional development sessions and any offshoot of education is “educational philosophy.” The term is somewhat ambiguous but offers teachers a segmented approach to understanding curriculum design. Some educators are deeply rooted in their educational philosophies and change is not a term that is usually welcomed by those obdurate personalities. Others look at their philosophy as a living document, a work in progress, a developmental approach to education that will never really be fully developed.

Developing a philosophy is very important to me. After reading the four educational philosophies, perennialism, reconstructionism, progressivism and essentialism I found that my personal credo really drives my approach in categorizing my philosophy.

Therefore, my educational philosophy would best be described as reconstructionist and progressivist. Reconstructionism is an approach in which the members, “...argued that progressivism over-emphasized child-centered education and mainly served the middle and upper classes with its play theories and private schools. They advocated greater emphasis on society-centered education that addressed the needs of all social classes” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013, p. 44). Serving a population of low-income minority students, I do find the progressive model a bit exclusive and the theory does not address the needs of all the students.

Reconstructionism credits the school as the institution in which social change can take place. According to Theodore Brameld, “students and teachers must improve society” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013, p. 44). Ornstein and Hunkins offer a great deal of insight about the philosophy, but the most compelling piece of information cited in the text is, “For reconstructionists,

analysis, interpretation, and evaluation are insufficient; students and teachers must effect change.

A curriculum based on social issues and service is ideal” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013, p. 45).

The students at XXXX High School face a number of injustices that can be attributed to factors including race and their socioeconomic status. Often, for many of the students, school is the one place they have the opportunity to explore society and community in-depth. They are guided by their educators to study social injustices and delve into fruitful discussions with their peers. School is one location where the younger members of society are brought together to understand the world in new and complex ways. The potential of this concept gets lost in the politics that surround education.

I would also consider myself part of the progressivism camp. Although I think of myself a reconstructionist first, the progressivism model presents components that are consistent with my personal experience and beliefs. The student-centered model ensures that engagement is high, “Students and educators now argued that students must be motivated and interested in the learning task and the classroom should build on life experiences and interesting activities (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013, p. 40)

My curriculum, which is focused on social injustice and the individual’s role in social movements, is very consistent with the two models discussed above. Students will have an opportunity to understand social injustices in the past and the social movements of protest that surrounded the injustices like the Vietnam War. They will use this knowledge and explore the inequities they witness in their community and research their role in creating change. Students will have an opportunity to bring in their life experiences, as suggested by the progressive model, and understand how they can start a movement and be the center of social change as explained in the reconstructionism model.

In my short time as a teacher I have found that the introduction to new material is a phrase that is very misleading. Introducing new material must always be connected to student experience. This unit is constructed on the philosophical belief that student experience must be at the foundation of curriculum design. The new material must be integrated into what students are aware of or have experienced in their lives. Without the personal connection, there will be very little engagement and investment from the students.

In considering my philosophical perspective as it relates to curriculum and instruction for my 12 grade ELA curriculum, I focused primarily on pedagogy and educational philosophies that were consistent with the four overarching goals that create the foundation of my course. The goals: Ensure a high level of rigor that will hold students accountable for 12th grade ELA content, Empower students to share compelling stories, Everyone will have a voice and Engage in respectful and fruitful discussions. These goals, simply referred to as the “Four E’s,” are an integral component of every unit, lesson and activity. My student-centered approach relies heavily on the work of theorists Peter Smagorinsky, Joseph O. Milner, Lucy M. Milner, Joan F. Mitchell and James Moffett. The framework of my approach is dependent on student experience and channeling that experience into authentic engagement with the content being taught and the skills that are developed.

In his exploration of engaging a student’s internal voice and the best methods to bring that voice to life, James Moffett discovers that experience and memories must be the driving forces behind every unit. Moffett (1992) writes, “Memory is such a rich storehouse of experience and knowledge that anyone who learns to draw on it for writing knows that he always has something to say that he wants to say. Memories can be about anything one has encountered, not

just one's own doings. Because memories are unique they tend to interest others" (p.

37). Moffett's practices allow students to tap into their experiences and realize that their 16-18 years of life are riddled with events that can address 90% of the topics we cover in a 12th grade curriculum.

There are studies that address the cognitive theories and philosophies that many experts believe should inform instruction. My philosophical approach to the development of my instruction and curriculum is focused on understanding who my students are and what authentic activities will allow them to explore their experiences and connect them with the academic content that is introduced to them. This idea of authentic activity is explored by John Seely Brown, Allan Collins and Paul Duguid. In their paper, "Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning," they write,

"Our case so far rests on an undefined distinction between authentic and school activity. If we take learning to be a process of enculturation, it is possible to clarify this distinction and to explain why much school work is inauthentic and thus not fully productive of useful learning. The activities of a domain are framed by its culture. Their meaning and purpose are socially constructed through negotiations among present and past members. Activities thus cohere in a way that is, in theory, if not always in practice, accessible to members who move within the social framework. These coherent, meaningful, and purposeful activities are authentic, according to the definition of the term we use here. Authentic activities then, are most simply defined as the ordinary practices of the culture" (Brown et al., 1989, p. 34).

I ensure that these authentic activities are prevalent in every lesson so that students are engaged in the content material and that the activities are aligned with the culture of the students and campus.

With that being said, I do not have complete autonomy in creating my units. My philosophy is influenced by what my students are expected to be able to do as defined by my administration, by the state and at the federal level. Jere Brophy explored this idea of the societal influence on teacher practices and philosophies in the late 1980s. According to Brophy (1987), teachers are subject to regulations because they work in schools which are established and maintained by the social community. Therefore, teachers are not the only individuals making the decisions regarding what is best for their students. Decisions relating to policy and practice are in the hands of the community at large which include agencies at the state and federal level.

Although some would argue that this is one of the reasons the education system is suffering, I interpret it as more of a set of checks and balances that are in place to regulate the most important institution in our country. The teacher should utilize this guidance to meet the needs of their students. This way, they are holding their students accountable and themselves accountable.

### *Meeting the Needs of the Students*

In designing this unit, I considered the needs of every student. This is not to say that when I plan I go through a roster of 205 names and ensure that each of their individual needs is being met. When I differentiate a unit, I consider the various academic levels within each class period and the needs of my English language learners. Brophy (1987) explains that achievement gains are greater when teachers structure the content in ways that help students recognize it as an integrated whole and offer the students material at “appropriate levels of difficulty” so that most



students can understand and engage adequately. For English language learners (ELL), this idea of offering students content that is just challenging enough to push them to new understandings without overwhelming them is defined by educational researcher, Stephen D. Krashen (1982) as “comprehensible input.” Although the term was developed in terms of second language acquisition, the concept of pushing students to new understandings without bombarding them with incomprehensible information applies to all students. In fact, many of the strategies that are utilized for ELL students are effective practices for all students.

This idea of challenging the students to accomplish tasks that they can tackle independently, without the assistance of the instructor, was explored by Russian researcher Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1932) coined the term “The Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD) and defined it as the academic tasks that the students can accomplish without the guidance of an adult. I approach my units and lessons with this zone in mind. As a teacher of seniors, my students are nearing a point in their academic journey where they are required to execute tasks independently. When I present to them an article and ask them to annotate the text, I never present a piece of information that is not within their ZPD. Though some do struggle through the content, I firmly believe that if they are not struggling then they are not developing cognitively. To ensure that I am differentiating their learning, I utilize groups to help in their development.

I place students in homogenous groups based on their academic levels. As mentioned earlier, in a single class I have students who are reading at a 6th grade level and others who are at a 12th grade level or beyond. In their text *Bridging English*, Joseph O. Milner, Lucy M. Milner and Joan F. Mitchell discuss the benefits of group work. According to Milner et al. (2012), when it comes to group work, “The teacher is not the sole provider of knowledge, students actively participate in their learning, and learning revolves around genuine inquiry and evolves out of

interaction” (p. 37). They go on to explain the various ways the groups can be assigned. I have found that the homogenous groups render the most significant results. When I ask students to annotate a text, I understand that there are some students who will dissect every word and idea and others who will be so overwhelmed that they won’t attempt to even read the text. I differentiate my groups to ensure that my students are intellectually challenged by their peers. The students who will have a harder time with the text are placed in 1-2 groups and I work with them to ensure that I am scaffolding their learning so that they can reach the same understandings as the other groups.

The idea of small group learning is also discussed as an effective strategy for ELL students. Margarita Calderon, Robert Slavin and Marta Sanchez (2011) explain that cooperative learning activities, “give [ELLs] regular opportunities to discuss the content and to use the language of the school in a safe context. Many English learners are shy or reluctant to speak up in class for fear of being laughed at, but in a small cooperative groups they can speak and learn from their friends and classmates” (p. 111).

The groups allow students to read the text and process the material in a smaller setting. In order to ensure that all group members are active participants, roles are assigned. Milner (2011) writes, “As we have implied, one of the great hazards for students who are inexperienced with groups is aimlessness. Group work can seem indistinguishable from lunch chat. A strategy that encourages active involvement of all members of a group is to assign specific responsibilities to each member” (p. 39).

Much preparation must be done at the front end to ensure that the students are approaching group work with a sense of collaboration and curiosity. The roles assist in this

process. Tasks in this activity vary in difficulty which provides an opportunity for all students to play an active role no matter how challenging the task.

### *Approaches to Classroom Management*

In order for this unit to be successful, I needed to have a strict management system in place. As far as activities are concerned, everyone single one has a strict procedure or protocol in place. Take for example the discussions. Students are required to use sentence frames in order to share their thoughts and they also must wait to be called on before contributing their thoughts. If they speak out of turn, there are consequences in place.

Almost everything in my classroom has a procedure. If a student wants to throw away a piece of paper or grab a tissue to blow their nose, there is a procedure in place. This applies to activities as well. If I announce that students will be working groups they know how I want them to move their desks and they know that they must stay on topic for the duration of the group work. When I ask students to annotate a text, they know that they have a guide that they must follow. They must define terms and utilize the symbols I introduced to them to at the beginning of the year to point out significant portions of the text.

I teach 50 minute periods and it is imperative that I maximize that time. I cannot waste time managing behavior or teaching my students how I want them to use textual evidence in their constructed responses. All this information is introduced in the first quarter and I am very explicit as to what I expect. By the time they are introduced to a unit that allows them to take ownership of the material, they are well-rehearsed on what the classroom policies and procedures look like.

Because this unit was so dependent on the students' ability to collaborate and discuss ideas I offered them a protocol with timed components to create a sense of urgency and keep the

students on track. Ultimately, I spend a lot of time in the first quarter of the school year establishing the policies and procedures and creating a culture where students recognized the importance of maximizing our time together.

I would by no means be able to implement this unit at the start of the school year. Without the proper preparation and practice in place, the unit would not succeed. I take pride in offering my directions to my students once and having them get to work without any further clarification.

As far as a behavior management strategy, I truly believe that if strong policies and procedures are in place, there will be limited behavior problems. Every teacher will experience behavior management problems to some extent but I agree with M. Lee Manning and Katherine Toth Bucher (2003) when they say that every school, classroom and grade faces a variation of problems. My behavior management in one class looks very different than in another class simply because the population of students is so different which influences the dynamic of the class.

### *Teaching Strategies*

The teaching strategies are the core of the unit. My student-centered approach to the unit enabled me to select strategies that limited my role in the instruction and empowered students to explore the concepts and ideas through independent analysis, small group work and discussions. Many of the strategies I utilized are discussed earlier in the text in the section titled, "Meeting the Needs of the Students." I have come to realize, the way to meet the academic needs of the students is through the activities and strategies I choose. Therefore, I select activities that have proven to engage the class. Often these practices are unconventional, but it seems as though the most unconventional practices are the ones that produce the highest level of engagement. Peter

Smagorinsky is a huge proponent of alternative teaching practices as emphasized in his book, *Teaching English By Design: How to Create and Carry Out Instructional Units*. His approach to teaching is unconventional, yet his strategies work. A number of the techniques and methods he proposed in the chapters are strategies that I have tried in my classroom with great receptivity. The level of excitement and engagement resulting from these unique activities present a new experience for the students that keep them on their toes and allow them to grasp concepts in a roundabout way.

Smagorinsky (2008) writes, “Students are often taught issues of form without being provided with good reasons for following them” (Smagorinsky, 2008, p.74). Therefore, when I plan an activity, I always anticipate my students questioning why we are doing what we are doing. If I can justify the answer, the activity is valid.

In addition to the small group work I discussed earlier, class discussion is a strategy that can be found in almost every lesson in some capacity.

Exploration of the content cannot and should not be done in isolation. Consequently, consistent with one of the four pillars of my classroom goals and vision, students will engage in respectful and fruitful discussion. This concept is explored by Moffet, but also explored by Smagorinsky (2008) who challenges the traditional teacher-led discussion and proposes alternate strategies to place the control of the discussions in the hands of the students. He writes, “...there are a number of alternatives to conventional teacher-led discussion of literature. I have found that students appreciate approaching literature through a variety of structures, tasks, and activities, which alleviates the tedium that have unfortunately come to expect in school” (Smagorinsky, 2008, p.44).

The population of students that I instruct personifies the point Smagorinsky makes about students expecting the “tedium” in the classroom. In order to break up the regimental approach to classroom instruction, a discussion-based curriculum that allows students to consider their ideas in relation to the ideas and thoughts of others plays a prominent role.

When preparing students for a student-led discussion, I provide guidelines to ensure that there is order throughout the activity. I have naively held discussions before without specific guidelines. The chaos that ensued forced me to rethink the process. What I decided to do was create a competition among my students. For this particular discussion, students considered the question, “Does the prison system work?” From past experience, I knew this discussion would be heavily debated. I created a small list of rules that could earn the students points and also cause them to lose points. I also provided strict sentence frames that had to be used throughout the discussion. Examples of these frames were, “I strongly agree with..., I respectfully disagree with..., I would like to clarify my point, I would like to add to \_\_\_\_\_’s point.” My role in the discussion was to moderate. With the rules and sentence frames in place, and with a friendly competition spurring the students on, the level of engagement was phenomenal. Students were able to consider their thoughts and formulate them eloquently and with passion. I am a firm believer in bringing in student experiences into the classroom, but for this particular activity I required that the students use the article to justify any experiential claims that they made. I wanted to ensure that they were authentically applying what they learned in the reading.

The only way, I have found, to get my students invested is to provide them with content that they care about. When I plan a unit, I start with the standards I need to cover, I then choose the content and the final step in finding the activities that work well with the content and scaffold the students’ learning towards mastering the standards. I chose social injustice as a thematic unit

because my students are aware of the social injustices that surround them but are often unaware of the direct impact it has on them. The article, “Why Prisons Don’t Work,” was selected based on the results of a survey I administered to my students at the start of the school year. There were two questions that provided information that was very useful in planning my curriculum. One question asked, what was one thing the students hated? The answer for a vast majority of my students, “Cops.” Another question asked them what profession they wanted to have in 10 years time. About 30% of my students answered that they wanted to be a probation officer or work in the criminal justice system.

The information proved very useful in choosing articles that interested my students. The article was a starting point for students to explore their community and the injustices they faced. Once I had them angry about the prison system, the anger fueled their curiosity to want to know more.

Researcher Jean Anyon, conducted a study that considered at various social classes of schools and found that, what is being taught is greatly influenced by the social class of the students. Even at elementary school levels social stratification of knowledge was happening. Anyon’s (1981) findings show, “School knowledge in the executive elite school was the most “honest” about society, U.S. social problems, and social irrationalities. It was sometimes expressive of liberal concerns, as well. Indeed, it came the closest to being socially critical. The children were given analytical and unsentimental insight into the system” (p. 38).

My students’ demographic characteristics clearly show that they are not part of what Anyon defines as the “executive elite school,” yet I knew that developing their awareness of the injustices they face would impassion them to want to learn more and find ways to combat these injustices.

What I did not want this lesson to turn into was a unit focused on the instructor projecting his knowledge onto the students, especially because we were discussing a concept that was so dependent on my students' experiences and what they deemed an injustice. I recognized the potential danger of my students feeling a sense of hopelessness at the end of the unit rather than a sense of responsibility to do something about what they studied. Paulo Freire discusses the dangers of simply offering students knowledge without allowing them to explore their own realities in his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire (1968) discusses the idea in terms of a banking concept, "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat" (p. 72).

Fearful of this happening, I emphasized activities that allowed students time to explore and research injustices they cared about without any insight from me. I offered them direction, but I did not influence their thoughts regarding what they were reading. Providing them with the opportunity to explore academic articles via the I pads and discuss their own experiences with their peers, gave them ownership over what they were studying.

Again, I am a huge proponent of integrating student experience in the classroom, but I want to ensure that the experiences that my students have within the classroom do not lead to a feeling of discontent. I want to empower their growth. John Dewey (1938) explains this idea of experience when he writes, "Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into. The greater maturity of experience which should belong to the adult as educator puts him in a position to evaluate each experience of the young in a way in which the one having the less mature experience cannot do. It is then the business of the



educator to see in what direction an experience is heading” (p. 14) My role as the facilitator was to guide students to understand that although our world is plagued with social ills, the students are the ones that can be that agent of change. With all the strategies in place, I needed to ensure that I created assessments that would authentically measure their ability to grasp the concepts.

### *Formative and Summative Assessment*

I would always develop assessments with the intention of testing what the students have learned. Although that is still the philosophy that drives my development of assessments, Smagorinsky (2008) writes that, “...each assessment ought to provide an occasion for new learning as students extend their thinking” (p.113). I approached the assessment in this unit with this new understanding in mind.

This unit is discussion-based and the standards that drove the development of this lesson focused a great deal on allowing students to engage in small group and large group discussion. The assessments that followed measured the students’ ability to independently apply what they gathered from the discussions into a formal and sometimes informal sample of writing. The first lesson focuses primarily on the students’ ability to understand how an argument is constructed. The students are able to work in groups to analyze the text and the activity is followed by a set of three questions that they answered independently that focus on the construction of the article. They are also required to use textual evidence to justify any claims that they make. Utilizing textual evidence has been in practice since week one of the school year. I anticipate them writing a great deal of research papers in college, and I want them to be able to find and effectively present textual evidence in their writing by the time they graduate.

In addition to the questions that ask the students to analyze the text, I always include a personal opinion question. I have found that a student's opinion can often be more telling of their understanding of the concept I am assessing. All my formative assessments are developed with the intention of assisting the students in the construction of their summative assessment.

The second formative assessment followed the students' discussion surrounding the question of whether the prison system works. Their discussions always provide me insight on what I need to clarify and if there are any misunderstandings. Throughout their debate, I take notes on the good and not so good points that the students are making. This way, I know that when they write their response to the question independently, I can see if they are synthesizing the information provided throughout the discussion effectively. Additionally, I always provide my students with a rubric before they tackle a writing assignment. Heide Goodrich Andrade explains the benefits of using a rubric in her article, "Using Rubrics to Promote Thinking and Learning". Andrade (2000) explains that a rubric sets clear expectations for what the teacher wants from his or her students, it provides students with more informative feedback about their strengths and what areas they could improve, and instructional rubrics support the development of understanding. My objective is to measure to what extent my students internalize the concepts. A rubric allows me to remain objective in my grading. After every writing assignment, my students are told that if they are not satisfied with their grade, they can rewrite their response, based on the feedback provided in the rubric, and earn a higher grade. I do not want my students to fear grades or feel as though their grades are the determining factor of what they know. I want them to internalize the concepts and master the standards even if that happens to take them a few tries.

I offer a few more formative assessments throughout the lesson that lead up to a summative assessment that measures their ability to utilize the information they acquired throughout the lesson and apply it in a real world situation. Students are asked to gather information about a social injustice and create a presentation for the class that offers a way to combat that injustice. They address a real injustice in their community and a solution that is feasible and practical. They ultimately understand how a good argument is constructed and how to bring forth that understanding through a formal presentation. The presentation forces them to be concise, and anticipate any questions that they class may have. Freire (1968) writes, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other (p.72). Freire’s words summarize my approach to the development of my assessments. I use my formative assessments to inform and guide my instruction towards helping my students have an opportunity to synthesize what they have learned through an authentic summative assessment.

The formative assessments are guides and models of what is expected of them in the summative assessment.

### *My Experience Developing the Unit*

I have found that with each new unit I develop, I improve a great deal. Yet, my ability to improve is not a singular endeavor. Without the guidance and instruction of veteran teachers, my peers and the educational theorists and philosophers, my units would remain stagnant and mediocre. Looking back on this unit, there are areas that worked exceptionally well and areas that still requiring tweaking if I chose to utilize this unit again with my next set of students.

As far as the development process, I started with the standards, chose the content and then created the activities that led to my assessments. In the past I have never planned my assessments at the start of the lesson. Backwards design was difficult for me, simply because I had no experience in regards to what my students know and what they don't know and if my assessments would be a fair measurement of their understanding of the content. Nelson Graff expands on this idea on his article, "An Effective and Agonizing Way to Learn: Backwards Design and New Teachers' Preparation for Planning Curriculum". Graff (2011) writes, "It is clear that teachers must be able to negotiate the needs of the students in front of them, the institutional requirements and material circumstances of their contexts, and their knowledge of content to decide what to teach and how and when to teach it" (p.153). As a new teacher, I struggled to do this, but I knew that creating assessments and working towards those assessments would provide me with a sense of direction rather than aimlessly planning my lessons with no end goal in mind. Jay Mctighe and Grant Wiggins (2005) explain in their book, *Understanding by Design*, that without backwards design there is a level of disconnect between the activities and the assessment (p. 28).

With all that being said, I wanted to ensure that my assessments were in place so that this disconnect did not affect my unit.

An area that I still need to improve is my timing. I felt as though the unit was rushed. A veteran teacher once told me that the more time you provide your students to do their assignments the less likely they are to turn it in when it is due. She was referring to our population of students, and what she said made sense. When I told my students that the assignment was due at the end of the period versus this assignment is due tomorrow, I would receive almost all the papers on time. Unfortunately, the quality suffered. If I were to introduce

this lesson to another group of students, I would probably extend the unit over 8 days versus 5.

The extra days will be work time, an extension of the research days and the days to prepare for the summative assessment in groups.

I was very impressed by the discussions and the final presentations. They reflected exactly what I wanted my students to accomplish in this unit. They were able to articulate their thoughts in a formal setting. I attribute this success to choosing the right content and connecting the content to my students' experiences. I have taught similar units where I offer students a sonnet and ask them to analyze and respond to questions about the content they read and there is very little investment. They are not interested. The content one chooses to teach makes a world of a difference when planning a unit.

The one area that I felt my students struggled with the most was the research component of the lesson. Before the start of the unit I asked my students if they had ever done any formal research. Most of my students said that they had. Their research on the Ipads did not reflect this. I simply offered them databases to search for academic articles, assuming that this is what they had done before. I was wrong. I was receiving citations from Wikipedia and individual blogs. I made sure that when we reached the research unit in the curriculum that I spent a few days explaining how to evaluate a source.

My assumptions about what my students know and don't know have put me in quite a few predicaments. I really think that with time, my ability to anticipate what I have to teach and what my students already know will improve.

*What I learned...*

As a new teacher, everyday is a learning experience. I am in a constant state of questioning. Whether I am questioning my approach to teaching new content, asking the veteran

teachers how they would address a certain behavior issue or questioning a new state or federal policy that dramatically impacts my students, there are so many questions to be asked. Asking questions, making mistakes and learning to be flexible have all led to a tremendous amount of growth in my first two years of teaching. I have come to three major conclusions about my students, my curriculum and myself as an educator.

My students are the driving force behind everything I do. Without them I would have no one to educate. I have learned, fairly quickly, that the myriad of needs presents a unique challenge every time I plan a unit. I am not equipped to meet every single one of their needs, but I don't think there is a point in my career as an instructor that I will be able to say that I reached every single one of my students. I plan with the intention of engaging them and helping them master the skills necessary to navigate a life beyond high school. I have come to terms with the reality that I cannot fully transform a student in one school year. There is only so much that can be accomplished in the classroom. No matter how good the unit, or how much the student learned, the education of a child is a societal endeavor with so many different institutions playing a role.

My second conclusion concerns curriculum. I have come to the conclusion that student experience should be the foundation of every curriculum. The students must always be considered before curriculum is developed. I appreciate the Common Core Standards because they offer a set of guidelines that are consistent and build on the previous year's instruction. I believe that the federal government's role in developing curriculum should be limited to establishing standards. It should be up to individual districts and schools to spend time developing a curriculum, through backwards design, to address the needs and interests of the

students. The content that is taught must interest the students. Without interesting content there is no engagement.

Finally, I have come to the conclusion that relationships are the foundation of every classroom. I can go into my classroom and teach everyday because my students and I have a strong relationship and a common understanding that I care about them and their performance in my classroom. I don't have to worry about behavior management problems because I have the procedures in place to address any issues before they occur.

I have also come to the realization that teaching is one of the hardest, if not the hardest, profession in the world. I know this statement might sound like hyperbole, and I know that I have not experienced every job in the world, but I stand behind what I say. I have thought about why the job is so difficult, but I don't think that I have experienced enough of it to support my claim. There is so much an educator is responsible for. As a teacher of seniors, I see myself as an educational gatekeeper of sorts. I determine whether or not I think my students are fit to navigate a life beyond high school with the skills their teachers have equipped them with. I take great pride in this responsibility and I will continue to improve my craft and educate my students.

Appendix A

Directions: Please answer the following questions based on your reading. Please use textual evidence as you see fit. Please use complete sentences.

What does the author argue in his article? Use textual evidence to support your answer?

How does the author open up the article versus how he concludes?

Where you convinced by the author's rationale? Why or Why not?



3	2	1
<p>A students will receive a score of 3 if they meet the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student provides a clear and coherent thesis</li> <li>• Student supports thesis with valid textual evidence that supports their claim</li> <li>• Student’s ideas are original</li> <li>• Student demonstrates a solid grasp of the conventions and mechanics of writing</li> </ul>	<p>A student will receive a score of 2 if they meet the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student provides a somewhat clear and coherent thesis</li> <li>• Student supports thesis with textual evidence</li> <li>• Student presents ideas that address the prompt</li> <li>• Students demonstrate a grasp of the conventions and mechanics of writing.</li> </ul>	<p>A student will receive a score of 1 if they meet the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student fails to provide a clear and coherent thesis</li> <li>• Student fails to provide textual evidence to support claim</li> <li>• Students ideas are disjointed and unclear</li> <li>• Student does not demonstrate a grasp of the conventions and mechanics of writing</li> </ul>

Community Injustice  
Root Causes and Research

Identify a social injustice that you have recognize in your community and frame the issue below:

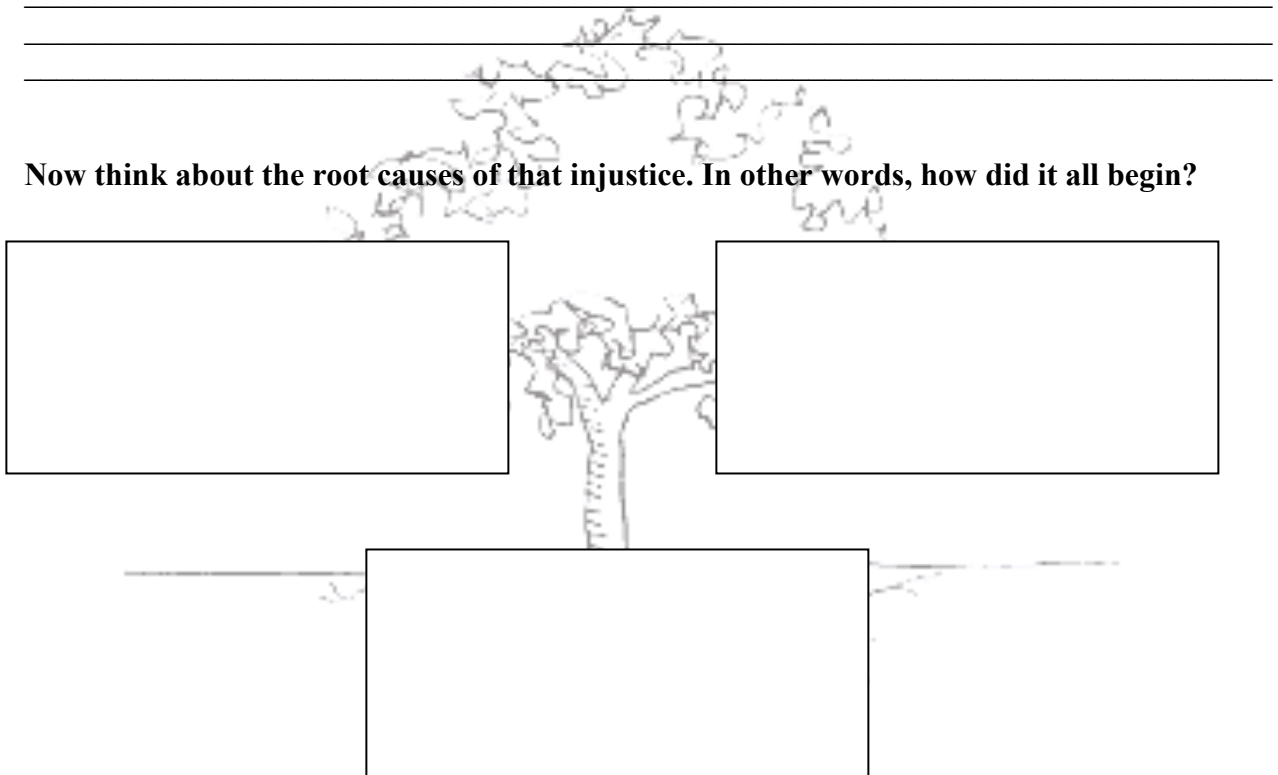
Injustice: An injustice I have witnessed in my community  
is \_\_\_\_\_

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**Now think about the root causes of that injustice. In other words, how did it all begin?**



*List your research sources below:*

1 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Culminating Experience Curriculum Design: Social Injustice and the Role of the Individual

Nevada Writing Proficiency Examination  
High School Holistic Rubric

<p><b>SCORE "SIX"</b></p> <p>A six paper is superior. It exemplifies <b>ALL OR MOST</b> of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses and develops ideas in a sustained and compelling manner, showing creativity and insight.</li> <li>• Clarifies and defends or persuades with precise and relevant evidence; clearly defines and frames issues.</li> <li>• Effectively organizes ideas in a clear, logical, detailed, and coherent manner using appropriate structures to enhance the central idea or theme.</li> <li>• Demonstrates involvement with the text and speaks purposefully to the audience in an appropriate, individualistic, and engaging manner.</li> <li>• Uses multiple sentence structures and word choices effectively and with a sense of control for stylistic effect.</li> <li>• Commits few, if any, errors in standard English rules for grammar/usage and mechanics.</li> </ul>	<p><b>SCORE "FIVE"</b></p> <p>A five paper is distinctly above average. It displays <b>ALL OR MOST</b> of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses and develops ideas in an effective and detailed manner.</li> <li>• Defends and/or persuades with important and relevant evidence; defines and frames issues.</li> <li>• Organizes ideas clearly and coherently using structures appropriate to purpose.</li> <li>• Communicates a sense of commitment to the topic and to the audience's involvement.</li> <li>• Uses varied sentence structure and word choice effectively.</li> <li>• Commits few errors in standard English grammar/usage and mechanics.</li> </ul>	<p><b>SCORE "FOUR"</b></p> <p>A four paper is adequate. It exhibits <b>ALL OR MOST</b> of the following characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequately focuses and develops ideas with detail.</li> <li>• Defends and/or persuades with support and clarity, using relevant evidence.</li> <li>• Organizes ideas in a satisfactory manner with adequate coherence and logic.</li> <li>• Uses a voice that is appropriate to audience and purpose.</li> <li>• Uses a variety of sentence structures and word choice, but occasionally displays some wordiness or ineffective diction; sentences may be predictable.</li> <li>• Commits some errors in standard English grammar/usage and mechanics that do not impede meaning; indicates basic understanding of conventions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>SCORE "THREE"</b></p> <p>A three paper is inadequate. It is clearly flawed in <b>SOME OR ALL</b> of the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses, but may not display mature or well-developed content.</li> <li>• Attempts defense or persuasive stance but position is unclear and/or evidence is brief, tangential or based solely on personal opinion.</li> <li>• Displays minimal organization; contains irrelevancies, digresses, rambles, or lacks logic.</li> <li>• Lacks sincerity of purpose in the writer's attempt to involve the audience appropriately.</li> <li>• Uses sentence structure and word choice that are somewhat limited, simplistic, mundane, or otherwise inappropriate.</li> <li>• Contains flaws in standard English rules of grammar/usage and mechanics that do not impede meaning; indicates some consistent misunderstanding of the conventions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>SCORE "TWO"</b></p> <p>A two paper is very weak. It reveals serious and persistent problems in communications. It compounds the weaknesses of the 3 paper in <b>SOME OR ALL</b> of the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lacks focus and development; may list items with little or no supporting detail.</li> <li>• Defends or persuades from a stance that is unclear or absent; evidence is vague or missing.</li> <li>• Contains serious flaws in structure, organization and coherence.</li> <li>• Attempts, but fails in the writer's attempt to involve the audience appropriately.</li> <li>• Uses sentence structure and word choice that are highly limited, simplistic, or otherwise inappropriate.</li> <li>• Displays consistent violations in standard English rules of grammar/usage and mechanics that impede understanding.</li> </ul>	<p><b>SCORE "ONE"</b></p> <p>A one paper is extremely weak. It has few redeeming qualities. It at least mentions the topic, but generally fails to communicate with the reader. It illustrates <b>SOME OR ALL</b> of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simply repeats the topic or fails to provide adequate development.</li> <li>• Fails to establish a position and/or develop persuasive view; evidence is not apparent.</li> <li>• Shows almost no structure, organization or coherence.</li> <li>• Does not address the audience appropriately.</li> <li>• Uses limited and/or immature sentence structure and word choice.</li> <li>• Overwhelms the reader with serious violations of standard English rules, grammar/usage and mechanics.</li> </ul>

The primary purpose of this rubric is to score the High School Nevada Writing Proficiency Exams. However, classroom teachers should use the rubric to ensure that students are familiar with the evaluation criteria used on the exams and to improve student writing.

Nevada Department of Education (Content Revised 5/30/00)



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