

An Intensive Choice-Novel-Study Assignment: A Proposed Model

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### **Why the Intensive-Choice-Novel-Study**

This summer I attended the Summer Literacy Institute in Saskatoon, where Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher spoke at length about the importance of choice-reading in schools. Coupled with research I read for my EADM 894 class, I became passionate about the need to include more choice-reading in my teaching practice and proposed that, “Replacing Whole-Class-Novels with Choice-Novels Builds Lifelong Readers in High Schools” (Gerrard, 2017). Though such a transition from teaching the whole-class-novel to the choice-novel may seem controversial to some, in that paper I argued how the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education English Language Arts (ELA) Curriculum would support such an approach. Following my completion of that paper I was left grappling with the question of how one would structure, implement, and evaluate such a choice-novel unit. After consulting with my ECUR 877 professor, Dr. Beverley Brenna, she encouraged me to explore this topic further. Herein I propose a model for how teachers can implement intensive-choice-novel studies in a way that could replace the intensive-whole-class-novel.

### **The Choice-Novel-Study Assignment**

The intensive-novel-study in ELA class can be done using individually student-chosen novels. In this proposed model, similar to Chris’s approach in Morgan & Wagner’s (2013) qualitative study, ““What’s the Catch?”: Providing reading choice in a high school classroom”, a class of students studies common mentor texts to better understand the elements of the novel and then applies their understanding to their individually chosen novels by responding to writing prompts regarding plot, point-of-view, characterization, dialogue, and setting in their notebooks. In addition, *great moves*, *big ideas*, and *tracking confusion* (Kittle & Gallagher, 2017)

Running head: AN INTENSIVE CHOICE-NOVEL-STUDY ASSIGNMENT: A PROPOSED MODEL

surrounding students' chosen novels are also explored in their notebooks. Assessment will be both formative (conferring) and summative (notebooks and outcome-based products) in nature.

### **Choosing a Novel**

It is important that students choose novels that are interesting to them and that are near their reading levels. Indeed, it has been “reported that struggling readers were more likely to be engaged when the texts they were reading better matched their reading levels as compared with engagement when texts were at grade level” (Jorgenson, Klein, and Kumar in Allington, 2013, p. 524). Even a text that somebody has 98% accuracy in reading translates into six words per page that s/he must use decoding skills for (Allington, 2013); most people avoid reading such texts because these are too strenuous to read. For a student choosing a novel, it is recommended that s/he pick a book s/he is interested in, turn to a random page, and read it. If there are more than five words that are unfamiliar to that student then it is recommended that s/he choose a different book, because the challenging vocabulary will impede his/her ability to read fluently.

### **Elements of the Novel: Plot, POV, Characterization, Dialogue, & Setting**

#### **Plot**

##### **The importance of the first line**

The first line of a novel is extremely important. Just like a fisherperson places a hook on the end of his/her fishing rod to catch a fish, the author is trying to use the first line (and opening paragraph) to catch readers.

The first few lines from Arthur Golden's (1997) *Memoirs of a Geisha* hooked me:

Suppose that you and I were sitting in a quiet room overlooking a garden, chatting and sipping at our cups of green tea while we talked about something that had happened a

long while ago, and I said to you, "That afternoon when I met so-and-so...was the very best afternoon of my life, and also the very worst afternoon." I expect you might put down your teacup and say, "Well, now, which was it? Was it the best or the worst? Because it can't possibly have been both!" Ordinarily I'd have to laugh at myself and agree with you. But the truth is that the afternoon when I met Mr. Tanaka Ichiro really was the best and the worst of my life. He seemed so fascinating to me, even the fish smell on his hands was a kind of perfume. If I had never known him, I'm sure I would not have become a geisha. (p. 8)

I remember reading and rereading those first sentences and being drawn into the book. Even now rereading that passage I can place myself in the protagonist's body and see myself in a garden sipping tea, deep in conversation with someone. I had bought the book prior to embarking on a one-year round-the-world adventure and began reading it on the first day of my journey in Fiji. In retrospect I understand that I connected to the idea that one person can change the trajectory of another's life, because my trip was a direct result of a colleague saying to me, "Why don't you travel? Now is the perfect time for you."

Analytical Notebook work:

Reread your novel's first lines and copy them down in your notebook. What impact did they have on you?

Creative Notebook work:

Try writing a few first lines of different stories. Choose one that resonates with you and develop it further.

### The plot diagram

The following is the plot diagram that is typical of many novels. Typically, it is not as simple as one mountain – there may be several ups and downs throughout the novel to keep moving the conflict forward – here is a blurb that briefly summarizes each plot point:

1. **Exposition**: the reader learns where the novel is physically set, the time period it is set in, and meets the main character (protagonist).
2. **Initial Incident**: the first major development in the story that causes conflict for the protagonist.
3. **Rising Action**: conflict that develops in the story, resulting in the plot moving forward.
4. **Climax**: usually the tensest part of the story and often described as the point in which the protagonist's fate is most unknown.
5. **Falling Action**: following the climax, loose ends in the story get tied up.
6. **Resolution**: the majority of the sources of tension in the novel are resolved and typically a sense of peace settles over the reader as s/he understands the fate of the main character.

A plot diagram that is straight forward is often represented like this:



Read the following short story “Trust” (Mr. W, 2011) and try to label the various parts of plot:

It was when he was a boy, padding alone through the wind-whipped strawgrass by the shore, that he saw the heron snared in wire. The heron would beat its wings, rest, beat its wings; but make no progress to freeing its legs and body.

His sneakers sucked mud as he entered the shallow break water. The heron grew frantic, blurred wings and slashing beak; then, as the boy's shadow draped the bird, it stopped moving. Resigned, perhaps, or hoping it was unseen.

The boy gave the bird's back a pat. Glossy slick feathers; the heron flinched at his touch. The boy flinched back, afraid of the razor beak, the trapped claws. He could see how the wire was wound around the bird, could figure out the puzzle if the bird stayed still.

A few more pats, and the boy settled. He stroked the bird's neck and back. He crouched in the mud to unsnare the heron and soon experienced something that would stay with him for the many decades of his life.

Deep-fried heron doesn't taste as good as one hopes it might.

**Analytical Notebook work:**

What conflicts emerge in the novel you are reading? Keep track of all the main conflicts in the story as you read (use bullet points). When you've finished reading your novel choose the key conflicts and label them with the number system provided (see Ms. Gerrard's example). Note that not ALL of the plot points need to be included, just the main ones. Your plot diagram might look a lot more like several mountains than the one pictured in the above diagram.

### **Point-Of-View**

Point-Of-View (POV) can greatly affect how readers interpret characters and experience plot developments in a novel. Authors typically write from three of the following POVs:

- 1<sup>st</sup> person ("I" & "me") – the reader has access to the main character's (protagonist) thoughts and feelings, and it is written from that character's perspective.

- 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited (“s/he and him/her”) – the reader tends to physically stick with one character per chapter (typically the same character throughout the book) and is more like an observer. Readers may have limited access to various character’s thoughts; for example, “Jill was furious when she discovered her house had been robbed. She called 911 right away.”
- 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited omniscient (“s/he said”) - similar to 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited, with the exception that an all-seeing narrator allows readers to jump to other scenes taking place at the same time.

Read the following scene that is described from three different POVs and notice how the voice of a character shifts: “I pulled out the gun and showed it to the cute blond bank teller, who gave a little yelp of surprise.”, “This bald guy came up to my counter and reached into his jacket. Suddenly, I realized he was holding a gun.”, and “A bald jerk cut in front of me in line. I hate cutters, so I was about to go say something, when he pulled a gun on the blond lady behind the counter.” (Creative Writing Now, 2017a, p.1). How does POV affect readers’ experiences of the scene?

**Analytical Notebook Work:**

From whose point-of-view is the story told? Is it first person, third person limited, or third person omniscient? From one person’s perspective or several? How does POV affect the plot?

**Creative Notebook Work:**

Rewrite a key scene from your choice-novel from another POV. If the novel is written in 3<sup>rd</sup> person you can write in 1<sup>st</sup> person; if it is written in 1<sup>st</sup> person, you can write it from another character’s 1<sup>st</sup> person perspective or from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective.

## Characterization

A novel typically has a main character (protagonist) and a person (or thing) who gives the main character the most conflict (antagonist). Typically, when an author introduces a new character s/he describes the character so readers can get a feel for him/her. Here's J.K. Rowling's (1998) description of Mr. & Mrs. Dursely: "He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large mustache. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors" (p. 1). What is noticeable about these two characters' descriptions?

### Analytic Notebook Work:

Choose one of the following options to explore the characters in your choice-novel:

1. Create a character chart like a genealogical family tree, and clearly identify who's who and what their relationships are to each other.
2. Cut out pictures from magazine(s) and paste these images in your notebook. Name the images after the characters they represent and explain why they represent the characters.

As your teacher, I want to feel a sense of knowing who the main characters of the novel are from looking at this page and understand the key relationships between these characters.

### Creative Notebook work:

Create your own character and write a description of him/her.

## Dialogue

Dialogue is constructed of words characters say to one another. If the author writes that Joey asks Jill out, that's not dialogue; however, it is dialogue if the author writes, "Hey, you want to go for coffee sometime?" Joey asked Jill. What is the difference between these two ways the author can share information?

Running head: AN INTENSIVE CHOICE-NOVEL-STUDY ASSIGNMENT: A PROPOSED MODEL

In the following example the author writes that if you asked a variety of people how to get somewhere they would theoretically all answer differently. For example, *"I'm sorry, I really couldn't say."*; *"No friggin idea."* *"Get a map, man."* (Creative Writing Now, 2017b, p.1). What does one learn about the above characters based on their dialogue? Next, read the excerpt from Bill Bryson's *The Lost Continent*:

Behind the desk sat a large, exceptionally well dressed black woman. This surprised me a little, this being Mississippi. She wore a dark two-piece suit, which must have been awfully warm in the Mississippi heat. I asked her the way to Rowan Oak.

"You parked on the square?" she said. Actually she said, "You pocked on the skwaya?"

"Yes."

"Okay, honey, you git in yo' car and you makes the skwaya. You goes out the other end, twoads the university, goes three blocks, turns rat at the traffic lats, goes down the hill and you there, un stan'?"

"No."

She sighed and started again. "You git in yo' car and you makes the skwaya-"

"What, I drive around the square?"

"That's rat, honey. You makes the skwaya." She was talking to me the way I would talk to a French person. She gave me the rest of the instructions and I pretended to understand, though they meant almost nothing to me. All I kept thinking was what funny sounds they were to be emerging from such an elegant looking woman. As I went out the door she called out, "Hit doan really matter anyhow cuz hit be's closed now." She really said hit, she really said be's. (Bryson, 2002, p. 70)

What do the rules of punctuation seem to be regarding dialogue? What assumptions might one make about the following: geography, age, personality, and the character's relationship to the person they're speaking with?

**Analytical Notebook Work:**

Copy down examples of strong dialogue from your novel in your notebook. Be sure to include who's speaking and what page number the quotes are from. At the end of reading your novel go back and highlight one piece of dialogue and attach a sticky note beside the quote explaining why you feel that quote is your favourite.

**Creative Notebook Work:**

Try writing a conversation between two characters.

**Setting**

*Setting* refers to where and when your novel takes place. For example, *The Break* (Vermette, 2016) takes place in present-day Winnipeg, Canada. Setting can help create a sense of atmosphere in the story. Often setting is how authors *show* versus *tell* the story. Creative Writing Now offers this example of telling versus showing:

Example of telling: It was a hot day.

Example of showing: Her shirt stuck to the small of her back, and sweat rolled down her thighs as she trudged across the parched grass to the porch, where a collie panted in the thin shadow offered by the rocking chair. (2017c, p.1)

Try *showing* one of these *telling* examples: she was so sad; they were so in love; it was a crazy day.

**Analytical Notebook Work:**

When and where is the story set? What is the mood and tone?

Copy down excellent examples of *showing* versus *telling*. Be sure to include the page number. At the end of the novel study, go bac and include one sticky note where you select the best example of *showing* and explain why you chose that example.

**Creative Notebook Work:**

Write a brief paragraph where you *show* versus *tell*.

### **Great Moves, Big Ideas, and Tracking Confusion**

During the Summer Literacy Institute I attended, Kittle and Gallagher (2017) both presented various approaches to novel studies that included studying authors' *great moves*, contemplating novels' *big ideas*, and creating space for students to *track their confusion*. I interpreted their teachings as important ways for students to engage in reading material and show evidence of their thinking, so I've included these sections in students' notebooks as well.

#### **Great Moves**

Kittle and Gallagher (2017) argued that writing and reading are interconnected and that becoming better at one craft enhances one's abilities in the other. Thus, they placed emphasis on student readers deconstructing good authors' writings. In order to do this, the following terms should be reviewed with students: foreshadowing, flashback, symbolism, repetition, irony, metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and imagery.

**Analytical Notebook Work:**

Collect great passages in your notebook. Does the author use the above devices? What impact does it have?

## Big Ideas

Big ideas (themes) are typically woven into novels. For example, forbidden love is a theme in *Romeo and Juliet*. Reread the short story “Trust” by Mr. W above; what theme(s) emerge? What personal connections do you have to the big ideas in your novel? Are these big ideas present in other texts you’ve read; are they reflected in world events?

### Analytical Notebook Work:

What are some of the big ideas you notice in your story?

Using evidence (at least one quotation) write a brief paragraph where you argue what is thematically taught in the choice-novel you are reading. In order to write this effectively, the opposite argument must also be provable. For example, having noticed that *forbidden love* is a theme in *Romeo and Juliet* I could argue the following opposing arguments: “Had Romeo and Juliet obeyed their parents and not pursued their forbidden love, they would have lived longer, happier, lives” or “Romeo and Juliet were right to indulge in their forbidden love, as they lived more life in that year than most do in a lifetime.”

## Tracking Confusion

Since some students often say they don’t understand what’s happening in their choice novels, Gallagher asks his students to track their confusion in their notebooks (Kittle & Gallagher, 2017), thus providing evidence of their thoughts. Having students track their confusion helps draw students’ attention to what constitutes that confusion and also helps them explore how it is (or is not) resolved as they proceed reading their novels. From a teacher’s perspective, student confusion could be the topic of a conferencing session and may provide ripe opportunity to discuss relevant reading strategies that students may find useful.

### Analytical Notebook Work:

What’s confusing? Write it down consistently in one pen colour. Possibilities include: words, characters, plot twists, etc. Are you able to resolve what is confusing? Write that down too (pick a different coloured pen).

### Assessment: Conferring and Notebook Evaluation

Conferring is one of the main principles of choice-reading. Renowned choice-reading advocate, Nancy Atwell, offers the following conferring sentence starters in her book *The*

*Reading Zone* (left).

#### Some Questions I Ask as I Roam Among Readers

**Always:**

What page are you on?

**Mostly:**

What do you think so far?

How is it?

What's happening now?

**And also:**

Any surprises so far?

How did you feel when you got to the part about \_\_\_\_\_?

**Main character queries:**

Who's the main character in this one?

What's the main character like?

What's his problem, or hers?

How's the character development in general? Are you convinced?

**Author queries:**

Who wrote this one?

What do you think of the writing so far?

Do you know anything about the author?

Any theories about why he or she might have written this?

How is it so far, compared to his or her other books?

**Critical queries:**

What genre is this one?

How is it so far, compared with other books about \_\_\_\_\_?

Is it plausible?

How's the pace?

What's the narrative voice?

How's that working for you?

What do you think of the dialogue/format/length of chapters/flashbacks/inclusion of poems/diction choices/author's experiments with \_\_\_\_\_, and so on (depending on the book)?

**When it's a page-turner:**

What's making this a page-turner for you, vs. a literary novel? What are you noticing? For example, is it formulaic—easy for you to predict?

**Process queries:**

Why did you decide to read this one?

I can't believe how much you read last night. Tell me about that.

Why did you decide to reread this one?

Where did you find this book?

**When there's no zone:**

Is this book taking you into the reading zone?

Why do you think it's taking you so long to read this?

Can you skim the parts that drag—the descriptions, for example?

Are you confused because it's hard to understand the language, or because you can't tell what's going on?

Are you considering abandoning this book? Because if you're not hooked by now, that's more than okay. You can always come back to it someday.

Do you want to skim to find out what happens, or even read just the ending, then move on to a better book?

What's on your someday list?

Do you know what other book I think you might like?

**Finis:**

Now that you've finished it, what will you rate this one?

Is this one worthy of a booktalk? Do you want to schedule a talk for tomorrow?

What are you planning to read next?

Teachers who

practice choice

reading regularly

conference with

students to

formatively assess

how their reading

progress is going

(Atwell, 2007;

Dickerson, 2015;

Gallagher, 2003;

Kittle, 2013; Morgan

& Wagner, 2013).

Regularly conferring

with students is a

must.

### Summative Assessment

Notebooks would be regularly handed in for summative assessment using the rubric below, and opportunities for revision within two weeks would be accepted so that students could review the feedback and have the option to improve.

Reader's Notebook Rubric

	4	3	2	1-0
Completion of all entries and organization	All entries have been completed and are neatly organized.	All entries have been completed; most are organized.	At least 50% of the entries have been completed.	Notebooks are unorganized and entries are less than 50% complete.
Depth & Quality of Writing	Writings consistently demonstrate excellent, in-depth, reflections of the prompts. Writings exceed expectations.	Writings demonstrated thoughtful reflections of the prompts. Writings meet expectations.	The majority of writings reflect attempts to answer the prompts, but overall the writings are too brief, shallow, and/or lack depth.	Writings appear quite disconnected from the prompts. Overall writings are consistently poor in quality.
Creative Compositions Communicate	Creative compositions clearly communicate a message; compositions evoke an emotional response.	Creative compositions clearly convey meaning.	Creative compositions have some communicative qualities, but these are inconsistent or weak.	Compositions may hint at some meaning, but meanings are vague and not impactful.
Growth	Evidence of process and revision are clearly evident throughout the notebook. Growth is extremely visible.	Evidence of process and revision are visible in numerous pieces. Growth is apparent.	There is limited evidence of process and revision. Growth is less visible.	There is no evidence of process or revision in notebooks.

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Running head: AN INTENSIVE CHOICE-NOVEL-STUDY ASSIGNMENT: A PROPOSED MODEL

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