

Seventeen Creative Ways to Connect With Literature

By Melissa Culver

Between the years of 1999 and 2005, I had the pleasure of teaching many students—middle schoolers in particular—how to connect with the deeper points of literature. Here are seventeen fun and creative ways to help you students gain skills that can (and should) equip them to do a whole lot more than "get through" those literature assignment.

1. *Book of Idioms*— In 1592 Shakespeare first recorded the idea of a “wild goose chase” in *Romeo and Juliet*.¹ “The early bird catches the worm” was first recorded in John Ray’s ***A Compleat Collection of English proverbs*** in 1670.² If you are eager to complete a task or wish to motivate a team, you may use the phrase “gung ho!” This is actually an adaptation of two Chinese words: *kung* and *ho* (*kung*, meaning “work,” and *ho*, meaning “together”). The first printed record of *gung ho* can be found in the ***Oakland Tribune*** in an article about short war films.³ To “bury the hatchet” was an actual practice, and the essence of its theme still carries over into our language today—when using this idiom. But, originally “[h]atchets were buried by the chiefs of tribes when they came to a peace agreement.” Truly, earth was moved and the leaders of these tribe-nations settled their disputes without their hatchets. The seventeenth century is the earliest recording we have of this term being used.⁴

What is an idiom? An idiom is “a natural manner of speaking to a native speaker of a language.”⁵ Shakespeare coined quite a number of the idioms we use today.⁶ A good, free, online source for idiom research is www.idiomsite.com/. **Dictionary.com**⁷ lists idioms at the bottom of some word entries. ***Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms***⁸ is a great resource with which to learn the origin, meaning, and history of thousands of idioms we use every day. Another great resource is www.phrases.org.uk. After some research, you’ll be surprised to realize how many idioms you use in your everyday language.

As a classroom teacher I had my middle school students create their own idiom books. Each book had a cover, a table of contents, ten samples, a bibliography, and an author’s biography. Each content page had an illustration of the idiom, a sentence (generated by the student, not one from a book) using the idiom correctly, and the meaning of said idiom.

2. *Book of Homophones*—Employ many of the above strategies to create a book of homophones. Use homophones that you find in your selected text. Homophones are words that sound alike but have different meanings. Examples? *Two, too, and to; hear and here; see and sea.*

3. *Story Board*—Have your child select from the story several passages of text that vividly illustrate some aspect of a particular character, richly communicate details about the setting, or are essential to the development of the plot. At the conclusion of reading (or during the entire process), have the student create an illustrated story board in which he/she shows others what occurred in the story. Use 6–12 (more or less) spaces on your board to illustrate what happened in the story. The first two spots might illustrate the setting and the characters, the middle four sections might illustrate the rise in the plot, and the final sections could demonstrate the resolution and conclusion of the story.

4. *Character Juxtaposition*—Take two characters from the novel you have chosen and illustrate them next to each other (using binder paper or construction paper). Next to

these illustrations, write out how these characters are similar or different. You'll be surprised by what you discover.

5. *Literature Constellation*—Odd name, but truly you are connecting several different things together. Think of other books you have read that are similar in some fashion or another—same theme, same genre, same type of conflict, similar resolution, etc. For example, ***Escape From Sobibor*** by Richard Rashke, Eli Wisel's book ***Night***, ***The Diary of Anne Frank***, and ***The Hiding Place*** by Corrie ten Boom could form a constellation, because they are all thematically and historically connected.

What does this educational tool look like? Using binder paper, write out all of the titles of the books and explain clearly and succinctly why they are related. Don't be boxed into thinking that they are only connected in one way. Explore! How else are they similar?

6. *Character Journal*—***A Taste of Blackberries*** by Doris Buchanan Smith is a book that would work well for this project. At the conclusion of reading this work, your child could take on the role of narrator (unnamed) and record in his journal answers to some really hard questions, such as these: *Lord, why did this have to happen? Why did you make bees this way? My heart aches. Teach me, Lord, to trust You.* Have your child use details from the book to express the heart of one character in the book in relationship to the plot or where the plot may go after the book is finished.

7. *Character Coffee Table*—This idea is similar to the journal above but far more interactive. With your child, have a discussion in which he or she pretends to be a character from the book. Here's an example for use with the book titled ***Charlotte's Web***: Ask your child these questions while your child takes on the character of Wilbur: *Wilbur, what fears did you have about Charlotte dying? Did you feel lonely when she was gone? Were you delighted when a few of her children stayed with you? What does God's mercy mean to you? How did you see His hand of mercy over your life? Is Fern a valuable friend?*

These types of questions are classified as HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills). They require the reader to move beyond the printed text and think independently. Here's a link that will help you explore more of these types of questions:

http://www.med.wright.edu/sites/default/files/aa/facdev/_Files/PDFfiles/QuestionTemplates.pdf.⁹

8. *Write a Theatrical Production (or just a few scenes)*—When I was in college, my fellow classmates and I were asked to connect with a Biblical narrative creatively, and I chose to write about Jonah. In the true Biblical account, Jonah was called to Nineveh and he went in the opposite direction to Tarshish. In my creative writing piece, Jonah also went in the wrong direction (Hawaii instead of Las Vegas), disobeyed God, and finally submitted to the Lordship of God after the calamity that he faced. By regenerating a similar story set in modern-day America, readers are able to better comprehend how the historical, social, and relational complexities of a particular text relate to our lives today.

9. *Opera Style*—Your student may be accomplished enough in music to write a musical piece, a scene from a musical, or an opera to recreate the events of a story he is reading.

10. *Visual Poetry*—Visual poetry is “poetry or art in which the visual arrangement of text, images and symbols is important in conveying the intended effect of the work.”¹⁰ It deviates from the traditional forms of poetry, yes, but it is still classified as

poetry. (I recommend that you monitor your child's exploration of this term on the Internet, because he could be exposed to some very raw and unfriendly examples of this art form.)

This assignment could be used if you want your child to think deeply about the environment that the characters are in. If your child were to use this technique after reading ***Forty Years in the Wilderness—Fahm's Journey*** by Dorothy Raye¹¹, he could, for example, do additional research about refugee camps in Thailand. The finished, illustrated work could include drawings of mosquitoes or other insects that are native to that area. What weapons would the military carry in that country? What would the frame of each dwelling look like? How would you illustrate the weather conditions? The colors that the student uses could be very monochromatic in nature to depict a very sad time, season, and location.

11. *Eulogy*—Have your child step into character based on information gleaned from the reading of the text, and have her write a eulogy honoring the person, the family, or the animal that died. ***Old Yeller*** by Fred Gipson is one book that you could use with this assignment.

12. *Training Manual*—After reading ***Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Wartime Sarajevo*** by Zlata Filipovic, ask your student to author a short training manual about what it takes to survive when your country is devastated by war.

13. *Picture Dictionary*—If your child is a budding photographer, this idea may be the perfect assignment for him. If he is being introduced to a book that covers a lot of new vocabulary, then have him record those new words as he reads. During the course of reading, have your child capture images related to these new vocabulary words. For example, I'd take a picture of my tube of toothpaste for the word *dentifrice*. In the completed dictionary, the word would be written, the definition would be written, a sentence would demonstrate correct usage of this word, and then my picture would sit right next to it all.

14. *Wanted Poster* —Using details from the text, create a “wanted” poster for an outlaw whom the student reads about in the book. Applying details provided in the text, draw a picture of the character and explain why said character is wanted. Consider doing this project with ***Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*** by Mildred D. Taylor.¹²

15. *Jeopardy*—Post-it Notes, poster board, or pocket charts are great tools for this activity. Have your child generate answers based on various categories for the book: setting, characters, rising plot, climax, falling action, conclusion. Remember, this Jeopardy! game is all about giving the right *question*, not the right answer. The answers could be on the reverse of each Post-it Note, while the point value could be on the face of the Post-it Note. As participants correctly respond to the answers, move said Post-its to a point board for score keeping.

16. *News Anchor*—“Live on the scene of _____, this is Katy Smith reporting for KFOX News Channel 10. It looks like we have a bunch of holes here in the ground. Young man, can you answer a few questions for me?” Have the child broadcast events depicted in the story. For additional casting, this may require participation by a few neighborhood kids or by the children in your own family. If your child enjoys working with a video camera, add that to the mix as well.

17. *Travel Brochure*—Pull from the book details about the setting and do further investigation about that location. Design a brochure that promotes that particular location. Include personal “testimony” from various characters in the book.

How beautiful it is to connect with literature through diverse and creative ways! Enjoy some of these fun ways to discover the depths of learning hidden in the simplicity of plot, setting, adventure, history, and characters.

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Endnotes:

1. www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/wild-goose-chase.html
2. www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/127000.html
3. www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/167400.html
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