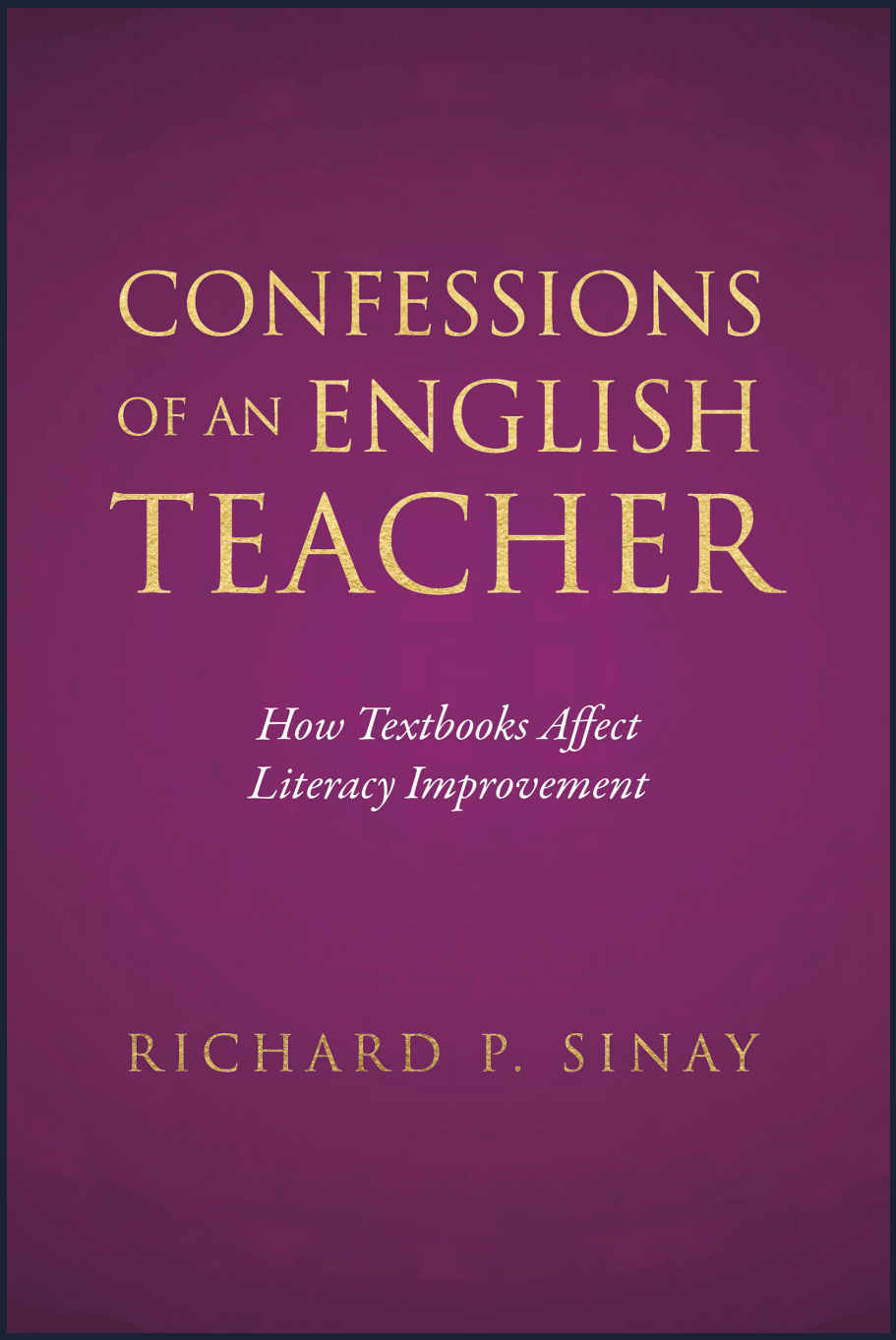
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Confessions of an English Teacher Book 3

Richard Sinay

BookGist Summary

Confessions of an English Teacher Book 3

by Richard Sinay

Genre: Nonfiction

Key Takeaways

• Sinay argues that literature-heavy, one-size-fits-all textbooks often fail average high school students because their reading selections may be linguistically inaccessible, culturally distant, and poorly matched to students' measured abilities.

• The central purpose of English instruction should be measurable growth in reading and writing—not simply exposure to canonical authors or literary terminology. Cultural knowledge can matter, but Sinay treats it as secondary to literacy development.

• Teachers should assess students' reading levels and the readability of assigned texts, then choose material near students' instructional level: challenging enough to build skills without pushing readers into frustration.

• A custom curriculum should balance fiction and nonfiction, reflect students' cultures and interests, and make room for reading, writing, grammar, usage, and comprehension—not let a textbook dictate nearly all classroom time.

• English teachers should act as reading teachers and reading role models: model reading, read aloud expressively, encourage independent reading, and build regular sustained silent reading into class.

• Sinay proposes measuring literacy growth at the beginning and end of the year, using reading assessments and comparable writing samples, so teachers can judge whether instruction is working.

• Writing should be taught as a process—planning, drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and editing—rather than assigned once and returned with corrections. Grammar and mechanics are most useful when taught through students' own writing.

• Vocabulary should be drawn from current readings and taught in context; comprehension instruction should progress from literal understanding to inference and critical evaluation.

• Schools should support struggling readers through dedicated reading classes, Title I-funded reading labs, school-wide reading time, and content-area instruction in textbook-reading and study strategies.

• Sinay's practical challenge is for English departments to collaborate on custom-designed curricula and, where necessary, move beyond textbook mandates while preserving the broader educational value of literature.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is aimed primarily at high school English teachers working with average readers, along with department chairs, literacy specialists, school leaders, and teacher educators who shape curriculum and classroom practice. Readers will find a veteran teacher's critique of literature-heavy textbooks and a set of concrete alternatives: assess reading levels, choose accessible and culturally meaningful texts, establish independent and sustained silent reading, teach vocabulary in context, measure growth, and guide students through a real writing process. The author's examples are especially relevant to educators trying to support students who are disengaged from assigned classics or who need additional reading instruction. The book is also useful for school communities debating what English class should accomplish and how to prepare students for college-level reading and writing. Compared with books that focus mainly on literary interpretation or broad literacy theory, Sinay's approach is practitioner-centered and deliberately prescriptive, drawing on classroom anecdotes and proposed programs. Readers should approach its broad claims about textbooks and literacy as the author's perspective and consider how to test the recommendations in their own settings, but teachers looking for a clear challenge to textbook-centered instruction will find a strong starting point for discussion and curriculum redesign.

Chapter Summaries

Preface

Sinay presents the book as a challenge to entrenched high school English practices, especially textbook-led instruction, isolated grammar exercises, vocabulary lists detached from reading, and essay assignments without meaningful writing instruction. Drawing on decades teaching high school and community college students, he argues that these routines can crowd out the broader work of improving literacy. His target audience is teachers of average students, rather than honors, AP, or IB classes, which he says already receive more tailored curricula. He is not against literature itself; he objects to relying on textbooks that overemphasize literature while offering little support for reading, writing, grammar, or usage. He hopes the book will prompt serious discussion among teachers and educational leaders.

Introduction

Sinay describes how textbook adoption systems give districts and departments a limited set of publisher-produced options, after which a selected book can shape classroom priorities for years. In his view, these books devote most of their attention to literature and offer insufficient instruction in essential language skills, leaving teachers constrained by materials that do not necessarily match their students or state assessments. The book's proposed alternative is a collaborative, custom-designed program for average students. Teachers would select readable and relevant literature while also teaching nonfiction, writing, grammar, usage, vocabulary, and comprehension. Sinay argues that if advanced courses can have curricula designed for their particular goals, average students should receive instruction tailored to their needs as well.

Part I: The Problems with Textbooks in the High School English Classroom

The first part builds Sinay's case against textbook-centered instruction through examples from his career. He contends that chronological literature surveys and genre-by-quarter courses can leave too little time for sustained reading, writing practice, and other essential aspects of English, while assigning works that many students cannot comfortably comprehend. Across the section, he distinguishes cultural literacy—knowing authors and literary periods—from practical literacy growth. His criticism is not simply that classics are old, but that a fixed curriculum can disregard readability, student background, cultural connection, historical context, and the actual skills students need to strengthen.

Chapter 1: How Literature Textbooks Shape the Teaching of English

Sinay explains how a literature textbook can determine the structure of the course. British and American literature surveys move through authors and historical eras, while earlier high school years may divide instruction into genres such as poetry, short stories, novels, and drama. He questions the assumption that covering many canonical works automatically improves students' literacy, particularly when students cannot readily understand the selections. He argues that textbook-driven schedules leave little room for writing, grammar,

usage, or purposeful reading instruction, and says the books may not align with state tests. He proposes a more balanced curriculum, including roughly equal attention to fiction and nonfiction, and stresses that literary exposure may build cultural knowledge without necessarily building reading ability when the texts are too difficult.

Chapter 2: Textbooks Have Outdated and Culturally Irrelevant Literature

Sinay revisits his changing views on teaching authors such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, and Beowulf. Although he once defended Shakespeare as an essential part of an educated person's knowledge, years of watching average students struggle with archaic language led him to question whether these works belong in required high school courses for all students. He similarly challenges the routine use of difficult works by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, and other canonical writers when students have little linguistic or personal connection to them. His alternative is not to reject literary heritage altogether, but to choose modern and culturally relevant writing for average students and reserve more demanding historical literature for readers prepared to engage with it.

Chapter 3: Textbooks are Linguistically Difficult for Average Students

This chapter distinguishes honors, average, and below-average readers, then argues that textbook selections often overlook these differences. Sinay uses The Scarlet Letter as an example: its vocabulary, syntax, and themes can make it difficult for students whose reading levels are substantially below the book's measured readability. Preteaching vocabulary, he says, cannot always overcome a gap so large that students lose the story's meaning. Sinay introduces recreational, instructional, and frustration reading levels. Students learn best from material they can mostly understand while encountering manageable new language; a text far above their ability can discourage rather than develop them. He recommends assessing both students and books, matching reading to ability, and recognizing that interpretation of complex literature should not take precedence over basic reading development.

Chapter 4: Textbook Literature is Not Culturally Adjusted for the Students

Sinay argues that a standardized textbook cannot adequately reflect the cultural backgrounds of every classroom. Recalling his predominantly Hispanic students at Valencia High School, he says many struggled to connect with the mandated works. By contrast, students were more motivated to read when they could recognize aspects of their communities and experiences in a story. He suggests enriching classroom and independent-reading collections with writers from the communities represented among students. He names Hispanic and Latino writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, and Rudolfo Anaya; Black writers including Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison; and Asian American writers such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston. The practical principle is to make culturally connected options available while still providing suitable intellectual challenge.

Chapter 5: How Textbook Literature Impedes the Growth of Literacy

Sinay describes the pressure to move rapidly through a British literature survey, from Beowulf and Chaucer to Shakespeare and later writers. He sees this coverage-oriented approach as a poor substitute for literacy instruction: teachers may move from author to author without giving students enough time to read, understand, discuss, and write about texts in a way that develops their skills. He also questions the extensive teaching of literary terminology when students may still struggle to read the assigned works. A student who learns terms such as alliteration or synecdoche has not necessarily become a stronger reader. Sinay contrasts inaccessible textbook selections with his own experience reading John Steinbeck, whose accessible but challenging novels encouraged him to keep reading and learn unfamiliar words through context.

Chapter 6: Literature Textbooks Don’t Allow English Teachers to Teach Other Skills

Sinay says textbook writing and speaking prompts were often unclear, unrealistic, or unhelpful, and that he and his students frequently created their own assignments instead. The books offered little systematic instruction in the writing process and little support for teaching grammar and usage through students’ actual work, leaving teachers to develop those lessons independently. He identifies comprehension questions as one comparatively useful feature, especially when students worked together and presented answers that revealed misunderstandings. His larger conclusion is that a literature textbook can narrow the course rather than support a complete English program. Teachers need room and resources to teach writing, speaking, language conventions, and reading alongside literature.

Chapter 7: Textbooks Don’t Support the Historical Context of Literature

Sinay argues that brief textbook excerpts and author biographies rarely provide enough history for students to understand a work’s circumstances and meaning. He points to works such as The Canterbury Tales, To Kill a Mockingbird, and The Crucible, whose interpretation depends on understanding their historical settings and the social conflicts surrounding them. He proposes treating literature and history as connected subjects: students studying a period should also encounter writing produced in or about that period. Teachers can build the background knowledge students need through contextual instruction and research. For Sinay, this is not an optional enrichment; historical context supports comprehension and helps students see literature as a record of social life.

Chapter 8: Textbook Literature Improves Cultural Literacy More Than Literacy

Sinay reports asking students to identify whether familiar authors were American, British, or European and finding that many could not reliably distinguish them, despite having encountered their work in earlier classes. He uses this example to question whether textbook

exposure achieves even its stated cultural-literacy purpose, while arguing that difficult readings are especially unlikely to improve practical literacy. He contrasts required reading with his own experience of choosing accessible books: as a high school senior, he read many Steinbeck novels and later continued reading widely. He attributes part of his readiness for college to that reading habit, supplemented by journaling and essay writing. The chapter's key proposal is to put literacy growth first and make cultural knowledge a secondary benefit of appropriately chosen reading.

Chapter 9: Why the Noncompliant Textbook Publishers Profit and Students Lose

Sinay argues that textbooks can be poorly aligned with the skills assessed by state standards, creating a mismatch between what students study and what they are tested on. He also questions the economics of adopting expensive books every six to eight years when, in his view, the available options do not adequately teach the full range of English skills. He suggests that some of the money spent on textbooks could support locally designed programs better suited to students. Such programs would require departments to collaborate on reading, writing, and language instruction rather than treating the purchased book as the curriculum. His criticism is directed at a system that rewards textbook adoption without establishing whether it produces meaningful literacy growth.

Chapter 10: Why I Had to Argue for the Textbook We Were Reading

A student's question—why the class had to read the assigned material—forces Sinay to explain the usual educational defenses of literature: it can build cultural knowledge, introduce social history, entertain, develop empathy, expand vocabulary, and prompt critical thinking. He discusses works such as The Scarlet Letter, To Kill a Mockingbird, A Christmas Carol, and Huckleberry Finn to show how literature can illuminate human behavior and historical experience. Yet Sinay admits that his explanation did not tell the whole story: textbook selections might not be effective for students' literacy if they could not read them successfully. He makes a similar point about isolated grammar instruction in a community college course, recommending instead that students read and write, with language instruction connected to their writing. The chapter captures the book's distinction between literature's potential value and the limitations of a poorly matched textbook approach.

Part II: The Solutions to the Textbook Problem: Background

Sinay contrasts average classes with honors, AP, and IB programs, which he says often have curricula designed around their students and course goals rather than a standard textbook. He argues that average students deserve the same principle of curricular adaptation: carefully chosen materials that fit their literacy levels and cultural contexts. He situates his proposal within a broader concern about college readiness and declining literacy, drawing on his experience as a teacher, reader, and parent. He recounts how reading many books helped

him grow as a student, while many of his own students struggled to complete assigned classics. The background section prepares readers for a practical program focused on assessment, accessible reading, writing instruction, and school support.

Chapter 11: The Importance of Readability and Cultural Suitability

Sinay presents literacy growth as gradual: students need to take manageable steps rather than be pushed into texts that overwhelm them. He recommends identifying the readability level of books and the reading levels of students, then selecting material that is at or slightly above students' instructional level. In this framework, easy independent reading supports enjoyment, instructional reading supports learning, and frustration-level reading risks disengagement. Readability is only one consideration. Sinay also calls for texts that students find culturally meaningful and current, including authors and subjects with which they can identify. He recommends reading aloud and modeling good reading, but argues that such support cannot compensate for a curriculum dominated by inaccessible works. Teachers should use assessments to make informed selections rather than assume that a classic title is automatically appropriate.

Chapter 12: Why English Teachers Should Measure Literacy Growth

Sinay argues that teachers cannot know whether students are improving without measuring where they begin and how they progress. He recommends reading assessments such as the Nelson-Denny test, or an appropriate alternative for younger students, to establish vocabulary and comprehension levels. These results can help teachers set goals and choose suitable reading materials. He also recommends assessing reading and writing at multiple points during the year. Comparable essays scored with a consistent rubric can reveal growth in organization, content, language, and mechanics; reading measures can be taken at the start, midyear, and end. Sinay draws on a school testing result in which the students he taught showed improvement, using it to illustrate how measurement can help validate classroom work and guide instruction.

Chapter 13: English Teachers Should Be Reading Teachers

Sinay challenges the division between English teachers, who may identify primarily as literature specialists, and reading teachers, who work on literacy. He argues that English teachers responsible for students' reading and writing growth should see themselves as reading coaches: encourage frequent reading, select attainable texts, model the activity, and help students build understanding rather than assuming literature exposure automatically produces literacy. He illustrates the influence of reading habits through his own family, describing how his children were read to from infancy and later became successful students. He also rejects memorizing weekly vocabulary lists as a primary strategy, recommending that teachers help students infer meanings from context. In practice, the teacher should read alongside students, share what they are reading, and create a classroom where reading is

visible and valued.

Chapter 14: The Independent Reading Program

Sinay proposes a department-wide library of books that students can choose from for reading beyond the standard course curriculum. To make the program effective, teachers should know students' reading levels and the readability of the books, then help students select texts that are culturally engaging and appropriately challenging. He recommends that teachers at each grade level collaborate to build and maintain the collection. Students can read their chosen books at home and during in-class reading time, then demonstrate completion through a short interview, journal response, or another teacher-designed check. Sinay describes maintaining a library of about 200 books and offering course points as an incentive. He sees independent reading as a practical way to build reading habits and give students ownership of their progress.

Chapter 15: Reading Along with Students

Sinay outlines ways teachers can model reading instead of treating it as an activity students perform alone. During sustained silent reading, the teacher should read a book too, demonstrating attention and sharing genuine interest. When reading complex works aloud, the teacher can model pronunciation, pacing, and interpretation; plays can be read or performed, while nonfiction essays can introduce students to forms they may not regularly hear. He particularly emphasizes nonfiction because it builds background knowledge that students can bring to later reading and supports critical thinking. Modeling should be consistent rather than occasional, so students see reading as an authentic practice rather than merely a school requirement. Sinay's central point is that teachers' behavior in class can either encourage or undermine students' engagement with reading.

Chapter 16: Reading Aloud to Students

Drawing on Jim Trelease's The Read-Aloud Handbook, Sinay argues that reading aloud remains useful for high school students, especially those who have rarely experienced it. Hearing richer language can build listening vocabulary and comprehension, while expressive delivery can make stories enjoyable and help students associate books with pleasure. He recalls using character voices in Washington Irving's stories to make the reading lively and memorable. He recommends reading slowly, expressively, and consistently; introducing the author; and discussing the story afterward. Longer readings can also develop attention and concentration, while finishing shorter books can help reluctant readers experience success. His practical aim is to make reading aloud a welcoming bridge into books, not a substitute for students' own reading.

Chapter 17: The Sustained Silent Reading Program

Sinay recommends beginning class with about fifteen minutes of sustained silent reading, using books selected through the independent-reading program. Students can continue the same reading at home, establishing a regular habit. He suggests brief journal entries and short teacher interviews as ways to verify engagement and provide accountability without turning reading into a burdensome exercise. The text should be manageable while offering a modest challenge, and the amount of credit or recognition can reflect the book's length. Sinay calculates that fifteen minutes over 165 school days adds up to roughly forty hours of reading. He argues that this protected time can make a meaningful difference, especially if teachers measure students' growth rather than treating the program as an informal extra.

Chapter 18: The School-Wide Reading Program

Sinay proposes extending regular reading beyond English class through a school-wide twenty-minute reading period or by reserving time in academic classes. A school-wide program should include staff as well as students and should be sustained long enough to evaluate. He recommends pre- and post-assessments so schools can determine whether the initiative is helping students develop their reading skills. A related approach is reading across the curriculum: students read material connected to the subjects they are studying, such as science writing in science or cultural materials in a language course. Sinay frames these programs as ways to normalize reading throughout the school day and support lifelong habits. He emphasizes that the effort needs consistency and evaluation rather than a short-lived campaign.

Chapter 19: Title I Reading Programs

Sinay describes his frustration that a school serving many disadvantaged students did not pursue Title I support for a reading program. Drawing on his experience at a school with a reading lab, he outlines how funding can provide appropriate reading materials, computers, administrative support, and a credentialed reading specialist. He argues that such resources can give students who are behind a focused place to build essential skills. He further recommends reading classes for students substantially below grade level and lower-level English courses with accessible texts. In his view, placing struggling readers in classes whose materials are far beyond their abilities can set them up for failure. The chapter's practical message is to use available funding and course structures to provide targeted, sustained instruction rather than expecting unsupported students to catch up on their own.

Chapter 20: Why Are We Teaching Shakespeare in High School?

Sinay distinguishes average students from honors and AP students when considering Shakespeare. He argues that Shakespeare's Early Modern English, allusions, and unfamiliar expressions can impose a steep learning curve on readers who have not developed sufficient vocabulary and reading experience. Brief exposure to a play, he suggests, may not provide enough practice for students to overcome that barrier. He acknowledges Shakespeare's

literary and cultural importance but questions whether required high school study is the best use of time for all students. Works such as Romeo and Juliet may also be difficult for younger students to connect with at an emotional level. Sinay's proposal is to reserve intensive study of Shakespeare and similarly demanding writers for students prepared to engage with them, including college courses, while prioritizing accessible literacy-building texts for average high school readers.

Chapter 21: Why the B.A. in English is Insufficient to Teach Literature

Sinay examines the gap between a university English degree and the demands placed on secondary English teachers. Using California State University, Fullerton's English major as an example, he argues that students may not be required to take all the American and British literature surveys relevant to high school courses, while many degree requirements focus on literary study rather than teaching composition, reading, or language skills. His critique is that teacher preparation should align more closely with classroom responsibilities: teaching literature surveys, nonfiction, writing, and literacy development. The chapter does not offer a complete revised degree plan, but it calls attention to a preparation problem. Future English teachers need both subject knowledge and practical training in how students learn to read and write.

Part B: The Writing Program

This section shifts from the critique of textbook-led literature instruction to a proposed writing curriculum. Sinay recommends writing about both fiction and nonfiction: literary essays can respond to stories, while expository and argumentative essays can build skills useful in college and beyond. A defining principle is to teach language conventions through students' own drafts. Usage, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics should be introduced selectively when they arise in writing, then applied by students as they revise and edit. The section's chapters develop this approach through a custom program, process-based writing instruction, and the MLA research paper.

Chapter 22: The Custom-Designed Writing and Language Program

Sinay sketches a writing program that links assignments to the readings students encounter. Fiction can prompt literary essays; nonfiction can lead to expository or argumentative work. This pairing helps students practice different kinds of writing while responding to ideas and evidence they have actually read. Grammar, usage, sentence structure, and mechanics should be taught in the context of students' drafts rather than in isolation. Teachers can address distinctions such as their, there, and they're, or teach comma use and sentence combining while students revise their own work. Because one essay cannot cover every rule, teachers should choose a manageable focus for each assignment and build students' editing independence over time.

Chapter 23: Teaching Writing as a Process

Sinay contrasts process-based writing instruction with the familiar routine of assigning an essay and returning it marked up after submission. He recommends first guiding the whole class through a shared topic so students can see how a piece develops: generating ideas, narrowing a subject, organizing, drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and editing. Students then apply the process to their own work. Feedback and revision are central because professional writers rarely treat a first draft as finished. Sinay describes peer response, teacher conferences, multiple drafts, and instruction in language conventions as parts of the process. He also argues that English departments should learn together and seek professional development, since teachers cannot effectively teach writing as a process without knowing how to guide each stage.

Chapter 24: Teaching the MLA Style Research Paper

Sinay treats the MLA research paper as a valuable preparation for college, where students may need to document sources and develop sustained arguments. He proposes a progression in paper length across high school: a shorter paper in the freshman year, increasing in scope through the senior year. The paper should be taught step by step, not simply assigned with a deadline. Students can select a debatable issue, choose a position, research supporting material, take notes, formulate a thesis, integrate quotations, organize claims, and draft. After feedback, they revise and receive instruction in grammar, usage, and mechanics. The process makes research, documentation, argument, and writing conventions explicit, giving students experience they can carry into college work.

Part C: The Vocabulary and Comprehension Program

This section proposes two closely connected supports for reading: vocabulary instruction rooted in actual texts and comprehension questions that reveal how well students understand them. Instead of teaching disconnected weekly word lists, teachers identify potentially difficult words in the assigned reading and help students use sentence context to infer meaning. Comprehension instruction should likewise be deliberate and layered, moving from what a text directly says to what it implies and how readers can evaluate it. Together, these practices help students approach a text with useful preparation, make meaning while reading, and demonstrate understanding afterward.

Chapter 25: Designing a Custom Vocabulary Program

Sinay recommends selecting vocabulary from the literature and nonfiction students are about to read. Teachers can scan a story or chapter, choose challenging words, and present each word in its original sentence. Students then use context to infer meaning before reading, with a definition supplied when the sentence does not provide enough clues. He argues that repeated encounters with words in meaningful contexts support more lasting vocabulary growth than isolated lists and quizzes. The teacher’s goal is to prepare students for the text

without overwhelming them with too many unfamiliar words. This strategy also helps students practice the broader habit of using context to understand language independently.

Chapter 26: Designing the Comprehension Program

Sinay divides comprehension questions into three levels. Literal questions check whether students understand directly stated information; inferential questions ask them to combine textual clues with background knowledge to draw conclusions; critical or evaluative questions invite them to assess an author's purpose, evidence, logic, or implications. Teachers should include questions at each level across readings, giving students repeated practice in understanding, interpreting, and evaluating texts. The approach can be used with literature and nonfiction alike. Rather than treating comprehension as a vague impression, questions provide a structured way to identify what students have understood and where they need further support.

Part D: General Literacy Practices

The final instructional section extends literacy beyond English class. Sinay argues that students must learn to handle content-area textbooks and develop study habits, since high school and college success requires sustained reading in many subjects, not only literature. He connects these practices to teacher preparation and curriculum design: subject-area teachers need training in reading strategies, and English departments should use their freedom to create more appropriate programs for average students. The section leads into a practical call for schools to combine reading, writing, assessment, and study skills across the curriculum.

Chapter 27: Content Area Literacy Development

Sinay argues that students often reach high school without being taught how to read textbooks effectively. He recommends training content-area teachers to use strategies such as SQ3R—Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review—and chapter mapping, which helps students condense and organize key ideas. These approaches should be practiced by teachers themselves so they can teach them effectively. He also calls for instruction in annotating texts, study strategies, memory techniques, and sustained concentration. Students may have limited access to markable school textbooks, so he suggests providing a text or copied chapters for annotation practice. His broader concern is college readiness: students need to learn how to study regularly, work with nonfiction, and maintain focus over extended periods.

Conclusion

Sinay's conclusion is a call for English teachers to move beyond textbook dependence and build curricula around the full range of literacy skills. He advocates teaching reading, writing, grammar, usage, vocabulary, and comprehension alongside literature; choosing texts that

students can read and relate to; and creating independent-reading opportunities that help students become readers for life. He also argues for balancing fiction with nonfiction, teaching writing as an explicit process, and avoiding shortcuts such as substituting a film for the experience of reading and imagining a book. The proposed change requires teachers to collaborate and take responsibility for designing instruction suited to their students. Sinay's central appeal is to prioritize students' actual literacy growth over simply covering a fixed list of literary works.

Notable Quotes

> *"“I am not opposed to teaching literature, but I am opposed to teaching it with a textbook.”"*

> *"“Literacy is growth that can be measured by how much one's reading skills have improved.”"*

> *"“The student gains literacy one step at a time, like climbing a step ladder.”"*

> *"“The English teacher is a reading cheerleader, and the growth from reading is the reward for that cheerleading.”"*

> *"“I wish to make a call to action for English teachers to go rogue.”"*

Full Summary

Sinay's argument begins with a distinction: he is not against teaching literature, but against using literature-heavy textbooks as the main curriculum for average high school students. Drawing on thirty-five years in high schools and twenty-eight years teaching part-time at community colleges, he says these books restrict teachers' choices while doing little to improve reading, writing, grammar, or usage. Honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate students are outside his focus, since their programs are already designed for their particular courses. His concern is the much larger group of ordinary students, who are expected to follow a standardized textbook regardless of their abilities or interests. He compares this system to other entrenched practices he wants changed, such as teaching grammar apart from writing and assigning vocabulary lists without meaningful context.

In Sinay's account, textbooks become the curriculum because districts purchase them and parents may assume that a book on each student's desk proves learning is taking place. Publishers, guided by committees of educators, select literary excerpts, author information, and questions; teachers are then expected to work through the material. But the books devote most of their attention to literature and offer little help with the other parts of English instruction. Sinay argues that this imbalance contributes to students' weaknesses in everyday

usage, including confusion over “their,” “there,” and “they’re.” If English instruction is meant to develop literacy, he says, it cannot spend nearly all its time on literary selections while neglecting the skills students need to read and write effectively.

The textbook’s structure shapes all four years of high school English. In the freshman and sophomore years, courses are commonly divided into quarters devoted to genres such as poetry, short stories, novels, and drama, with nonfiction sometimes included but often neglected. Junior-year American literature and senior-year British literature are typically taught as chronological surveys. Sinay describes the American textbook’s progression from early America through the Renaissance, the Civil War and frontier, the modern age, the postwar era, and contemporary writing. The promise of this survey is exposure to major authors and periods; in practice, he says, teachers are driven to cover one selection after another. He proposes a more balanced use of fiction and nonfiction, rather than allowing the textbook’s organization to determine what occupies the classroom.

He also questions whether this literary survey prepares students for the measures by which their learning is judged. In his experience, textbook content did not align with state standardized tests, even though teachers remained accountable for students’ performance. The mismatch, he argues, leaves teachers constrained by books that neither cover the tested material nor reliably advance students’ reading skills. The books may instead provide what he calls cultural literacy: familiarity with prominent writers and their works. Students might encounter Twain, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson, yet still fail to comprehend what they are reading. For Sinay, knowing the names of canonical authors is less important than becoming a stronger reader and writer; cultural knowledge has value, but it should not replace measurable literacy growth.

The distance between the assigned literature and students’ abilities is especially clear in Sinay’s experience teaching Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter to juniors. He places the novel at about a twelfth-grade reading level, while his average students often read below grade level. Its syntax, vocabulary, themes, and subject matter made comprehension difficult, even after he taught vocabulary before each portion. As the years passed, he found himself adding still more words to the lists students needed. Though he loved Hawthorne’s language, he came to feel that he was reading the novel for himself rather than for his class. One district adopted it for several schools, including a lower-level school where students were expected to tackle a text several grades above their reading ability. Sinay asks whether such an assignment narrows the gap between students and reading or simply leaves them overwhelmed.

To explain that mismatch, he distinguishes among recreational, instructional, and frustration-level reading. Recreational texts are comfortable and relatively easy; instructional texts are at a student’s level or slightly above, offering a productive challenge; frustration-level

texts are too difficult for the reader to understand successfully. Sinay describes Great Expectations as a twelfth-grade-level book and objects to assigning it to freshmen, including honors students who may not all read at that level. He notes that unfamiliar vocabulary and syntax can obstruct comprehension: when a reader encounters too many difficult words, reading becomes a struggle rather than an opportunity to build skill. Teachers, he says, should know both their students' reading levels and the readability of assigned books, instead of assuming that every student can manage a classic simply because it is considered important.

Sinay's criticism of the traditional reading list is also historical and cultural. He questions the usefulness, for average students, of demanding works by Beowulf's anonymous author, Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, and T. S. Eliot. In his view, archaic or difficult language can make these works inaccessible, while their social worlds may feel remote from the lives of teenagers. He recalls initially defending Shakespeare in response to a student newspaper article opposing his study, on the grounds that educated people should know the playwright. Yet watching average students struggle changed his mind: Shakespeare and other difficult writers might be better suited to college students, while high school reading should help students become more capable readers. He points to Sandra Cisneros as a writer whose work can connect more readily with Hispanic students, illustrating the possibility of choosing literature that is both challenging and more familiar in language or experience.

At Valencia High School, where his students were primarily Hispanic, Sinay saw many struggle to connect with mandated selections. He argues that a uniform textbook assumes the same reading needs and cultural points of reference for everyone. A custom selection of writers and works, by contrast, could make students more willing to read by giving them characters, settings, and experiences they recognize. His examples include Hispanic writers such as Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz, Rudolfo Anaya, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Isabel Allende, as well as Black writers including Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. For students of Asian descent, he names Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Pearl Buck, and Celeste Ng. Such representation, he suggests, need not depend on replacing every shared classroom text: a diverse classroom library could give students access to culturally meaningful independent choices.

Ultimately, Sinay contends that textbook-driven teaching impedes literacy because the literature dominates time that could be spent developing reading and writing. Teachers may devote substantial attention to identifying literary devices—metaphor, simile, rhyme, alliteration, and other terminology—without demonstrating that students' literacy has improved. A chronological survey can also keep the class moving so quickly from author to author that students never gain the sustained, comprehensible reading experience needed to grow. When selections are too difficult or distant, students may acquire some knowledge

about literary periods but not the confidence or comprehension that would make them stronger readers. Sinay's central objection, then, is not that students should never meet great literature, but that exposure to it is not itself proof of literacy development.

That tension became personal when a bright student in Sinay's junior American literature class asked, "Why do we read this stuff?" The question derailed the lesson: Sinay felt he owed the class an honest explanation for its chronological survey of American writers. He answered that literature is part of a country's culture and social history, preserving the beliefs and behavior of people in another time. Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, for instance, could introduce students to Puritan life and its judgments. Literature could also entertain, invite readers to identify with characters, and deepen empathy. Reading, he argued, builds vocabulary and critical thinking, while works from other countries offer insight into their cultures. Yet his defense was only partly candid. He told the students that a year of good literature would strengthen literacy, but knew that the textbook's selections were often ineffective for that purpose. The right literature, he concluded, could improve language more effectively than inaccessible textbook material.

Sinay's alternative begins with a contrast he found striking: honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate classes generally had custom-designed curricula rather than textbooks, while average students were expected to use books poorly suited to their abilities. If advanced students deserved material adjusted to their reading levels and cultural backgrounds, he argued, so did everyone else. He saw the problem as part of a broader literacy crisis, and recalled his own education as evidence that reading habits could change. He had not grown up around books, but an English teacher's "Wake Up and Read!" list prompted him to read for hours, including many Steinbeck novels. Years later, when he taught Huckleberry Finn, he struggled to get most students to finish it, even when he read portions aloud. Some who completed the novel liked it; many others had not read enough to judge it. For Sinay, that experience reinforced the need to choose books students could actually read and wanted to read.

The first practical step, he says, is to assess both the students' reading abilities and the difficulty of assigned works. Readability indicates the grade level of a text. Students need material at their instructional level—at or slightly above their current ability—where they can encounter new vocabulary and make progress without being overwhelmed. Easier recreational reading can be enjoyable and confidence-building; frustration-level texts, by contrast, exceed a reader's ability enough to undermine comprehension and engagement. Sinay argues that assigning such works without regard to students' levels is professionally irresponsible. He also calls for culturally engaging choices: students are more likely to connect with books that speak to their experiences and interests. A text should challenge readers, but not push them so far beyond reach that they disengage.

To find out whether instruction is working, Sinay says, English teachers should measure literacy growth rather than assume that completing a literary survey has produced it. He recommends assessing reading at the beginning of the year and again during and at the end of it. The Nelson-Denny test can measure vocabulary and comprehension; for incoming freshmen whose language abilities are more limited, he suggests the Nelson Reading Test. Grade-equivalent scores help teachers see where students are starting, while reading speed offers a measure of fluency, which can affect comprehension. Writing should be assessed as well: students can produce an initial essay and a later comparable sample, scored with the same rubric for organization, content, language, and mechanics. Such evidence gives teachers a basis for judging whether their curriculum supports growth, rather than relying on state test results as a verdict on classroom instruction.

Sinay insists that this work makes English teachers reading teachers, whether or not they identify that way. A literature degree may teach someone to analyze texts, but the classroom's central responsibility, in his view, is to improve students' reading and writing. He describes himself as having seen students through both a reading teacher's and an English teacher's eyes: instead of treating them primarily as interpreters of literature, he wondered how well they could read and how to help them improve. His own children's experience strengthened his belief in reading's importance. He and his wife, an elementary teacher, read to their children from infancy, kept books around them, and often reread favorites such as Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs. Both children became strong students and went on to Stanford and UC Santa Barbara. Sinay also urges teachers to teach vocabulary in context, helping students infer meanings from sentences instead of memorizing isolated weekly lists. A teacher who reads, encourages reading, and helps students work out unfamiliar words is acting as a reading coach.

That role becomes concrete in an independent reading program, organized by English departments and tailored to students' reading levels and cultural interests. Teachers can assess students, maintain a library of books with known readability levels, and help each student select a title roughly a grade level above current ability. Sinay describes building a classroom library of about two hundred books. Students read their choices in class and at home, then demonstrate completion through a brief interview about the book; he awarded extra points, which motivated many students to read and could support their course grades. He also encouraged students to use spare minutes between classes to read, as he had done in high school. The program, he argues, should be a department-wide effort rather than the responsibility of one isolated teacher.

Students also need to see their teacher reading. During silent reading, Sinay recommends that the teacher sit with a book and read consistently, instead of using the time for other tasks. Sharing what the teacher is reading can make reading visible as a genuine habit. He treats reading plays aloud as another shared activity: students can take parts over several days, or

the class can listen to professional performances when a play is more complicated. Nonfiction essays should also be read aloud, he says, since they expose students to forms of writing they may not often hear and help build background knowledge for reading more broadly.

Reading aloud directly to students, even teenagers, offers a further way to develop language and attention. Drawing on Jim Trelease's The Read-Aloud Handbook, Sinay says that hearing complex language can expand listening vocabulary and comprehension. Expressive delivery can also make books pleasurable rather than merely another school task. When he read Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle," he used different voices for the characters, making the stories entertaining and memorable. He recommends reading slowly, bringing characters to life, and naming the author so students connect the story with its writer. Finishing a whole story or book matters too: students who have not completed a book in a long time can discover that they are capable of doing so. After a reading, discussion gives them room to ask questions and return to the text for answers. Throughout, Sinay's aim is to make reading expressive, enjoyable, and regular.

The question of what students should encounter in literature leads Sinay to reconsider the place of Shakespeare in the average high school classroom. Honors and Advanced Placement students, he argues, are likelier to have read widely enough to bring the vocabulary and background knowledge needed for challenging works. Average students often have not. Shakespeare's early modern English demands repeated exposure before its forms and meanings become familiar, and a few scattered plays cannot make the language easy to follow. When students arrive with limited vocabulary, they may spend their time struggling to understand the words rather than developing as readers.

Sinay recalls that he once defended Shakespeare after an honors student argued in the school newspaper that his plays were outdated. He claimed that Shakespeare was essential to an educated person's knowledge and that the plays offered insights into human behavior. In retrospect, he believes the student had a stronger case for average students. Even Romeo and Juliet may come too early: ninth-graders might recognize the characters' youth, but may not have the life experience to grasp the depth of their heartbreak. The issue is not whether Shakespeare has cultural value, but whether studying him in high school advances the literacy of students who cannot readily read him. Sinay proposes leaving Shakespeare and other major British writers for college, where students can study them as part of a general education.

He also questions whether a bachelor's degree in English prepares teachers for the literature and skills they are expected to teach. At California State University, Fullerton, the English major requires forty-two units, but students need not take all four survey courses in British and American literature, even though high school teachers may be expected to teach those subjects. The degree's advanced writing course demonstrates a student's writing ability; it

does not train them to teach composition. Likewise, courses on the structure and history of English, Sinay argues, do little to prepare a teacher for practical instruction in a secondary classroom. The major is structured largely for academic study, not for the daily demands of teaching.

He points to a further mismatch between college preparation and high school English: the university curriculum includes no required nonfiction course that would prepare future teachers to teach the nonfiction emphasized in school standards. Although students can choose courses in diverse literatures, they may graduate without the range of preparation needed for the students and assignments they will encounter. Sinay's objection is not simply that teachers lack knowledge of literature; it is that their training does not reliably connect literary study with teaching reading and writing. In his view, prospective teachers need preparation that matches the work they will actually do.

For writing instruction, Sinay proposes that English departments build a program around the readings students study. Fiction can lead to literary essays, while nonfiction can prompt expository and argumentative writing. Grammar, usage, and mechanics should be taught through these assignments, not as disconnected exercises. When students have drafts in hand, the teacher can address common usage problems such as confusing "their," "there," and "they're," or "affect" and "effect." Students can also examine sentence structure in their own work, practice combining and imitating sentences, and apply punctuation rules to their writing. A lesson on commas, for example, can lead students to check whether they have placed a comma after an opening dependent clause.

Because one essay cannot accommodate every grammar and editing lesson, teachers should select specific skills to address across successive pieces of writing. The aim is not just to correct a paper, but to help students become more independent editors. Sinay contrasts this approach with the familiar routine of assigning an essay, marking it heavily in red ink, and returning it with a grade. In that routine, students receive no guidance before submission and no chance to revise; the teacher's corrections end the experience instead of teaching them how to write.

Teaching writing as a process means guiding students through the work in stages. Sinay recommends beginning with a whole-class essay on a shared topic, so the teacher can model how to generate and limit ideas, plan an argument, draft, and improve the paper. Once students understand the process, they can write independently on topics of their own. They should organize ideas, produce a rough draft, receive feedback from peers and the teacher, revise, and edit before submitting their work. Professional writers also seek responses from others and revise multiple times; students should learn that an initial draft is not a finished product. Writing can also serve as discovery, allowing students to write in order to find out what they think before shaping and polishing their ideas.

Sinay argues that teachers need training in this approach and that English departments should make composition instruction a regular subject of professional discussion. He describes learning to confer with students about their writing through work associated with Ross Winterowd at the University of Southern California, while lamenting that many departments fail to keep up with developments in composition teaching. A process should not become a rigid formula, but students need a clear, supported way to move from an idea to a finished essay.

The same gradual, guided approach applies to the MLA-style research paper. Students should learn documentation step by step, building toward a substantial senior paper that prepares them for college. Sinay proposes increasing the assignment's length by grade: three pages for freshmen, five for sophomores, seven for juniors, and ten for seniors. A class can agree on a debatable issue, such as gun control, and students can choose which position to defend. They research their arguments, take notes, and shape a thesis that states both their claim and its supporting reasons. The teacher then explains how to integrate and punctuate quotations, organize ideas, and draft the paper. After the first draft, students receive feedback and revise. Instruction in grammar, usage, and mechanics can accompany the second draft, so students apply those lessons to the paper they are actually preparing. The assignment, Sinay insists, must be taught rather than simply handed out.

His custom vocabulary program likewise begins with the material students read, not with weekly lists detached from meaning. Before assigning a selection, the teacher identifies potentially difficult words and presents each one in its original sentence. Students use the surrounding language to infer meaning; when context is insufficient, the teacher can supply a definition. For a novel, this work can be done chapter by chapter, preparing students to understand the reading ahead. Sinay rejects routine Friday tests on isolated word lists as busywork that does not build literacy. Vocabulary develops as readers repeatedly encounter unfamiliar words and use context to make informed guesses, provided the text does not overwhelm them with too many unknowns. Reading, writing, language study, and vocabulary instruction thus work together, with each lesson grounded in words students are actually learning to understand and use.

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