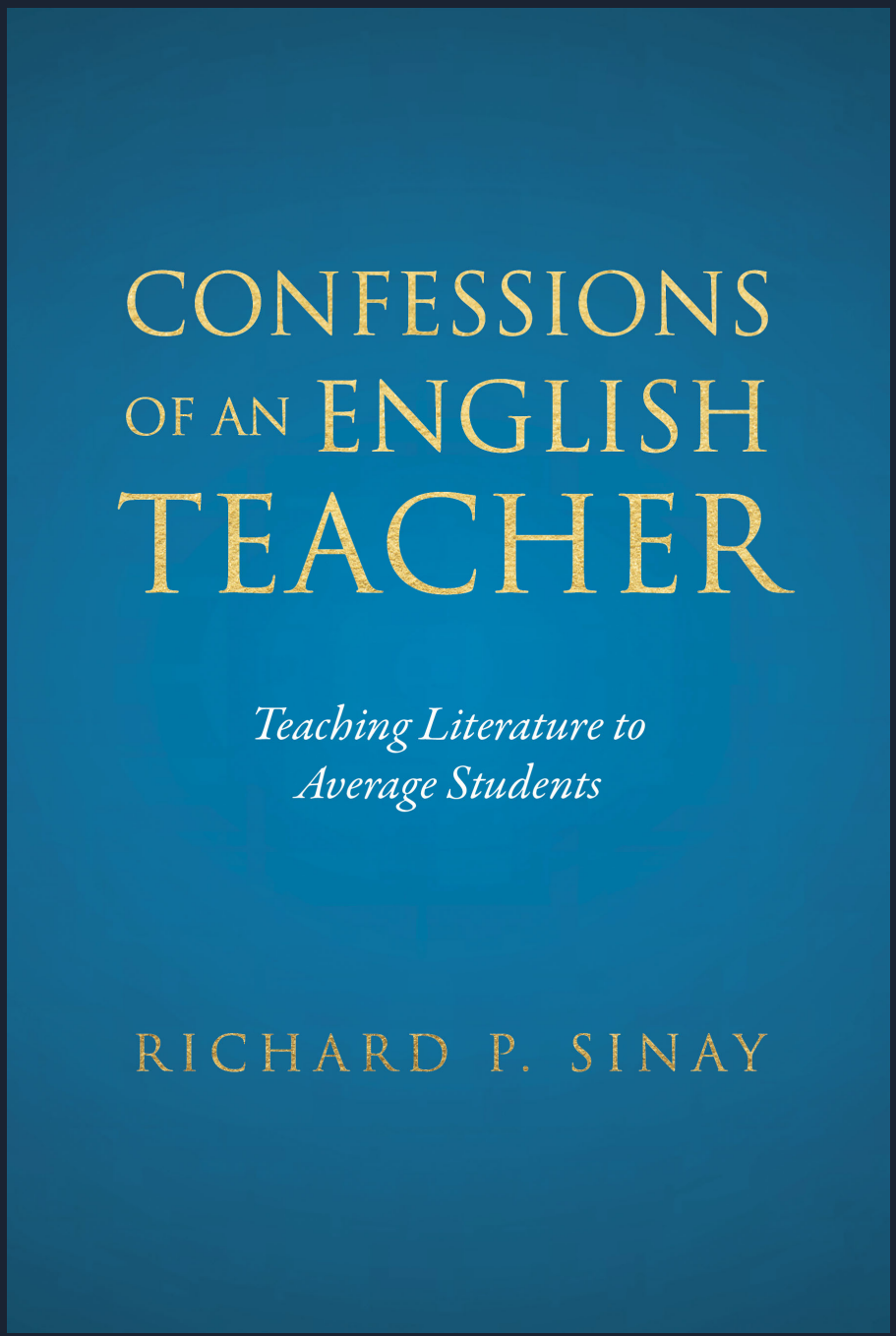
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Confessions of an English Teacher Book 7

Richard Sinay

BookGist Summary

Confessions of an English Teacher Book 7

by Richard Sinay

Genre: Language Arts

Key Takeaways

• The book's central aim for English instruction should be improving students' literacy and helping them become sustained, independent readers—not covering a fixed canon or maximizing literary terminology.

• Reading assignments should be both culturally engaging and linguistically accessible. The author argues that students are more likely to read when they can connect with a work and understand it without being overwhelmed.

• The Step-Ladder Approach matches reading to students' assessed abilities, then increases difficulty gradually. Texts should challenge learners without pushing them into frustration, where comprehension and motivation can collapse.

• Teachers should assess reading ability and measure growth rather than assume that exposure to difficult literature automatically improves literacy. Pre- and post-assessments can help reveal whether instruction is working.

• Reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, usage, and mechanics belong together: students develop language by reading and writing, while grammar and vocabulary are most useful when taught in the context of those activities.

• Writing should be taught as a process. Teachers can model how to generate ideas, form a thesis, gather evidence, draft, receive feedback, revise, and edit instead of assigning an essay and only grading the finished product.

• Literary study should prioritize understanding and evidence-based interpretation over prolonged analysis or memorizing terminology. Comprehension questions and discussion help students reach defensible conclusions about texts.

• The author urges teachers to adapt or move beyond one-size-fits-all textbooks, selecting works and genres that fit their students' reading levels, interests, and backgrounds while still building transferable skills.

• English teacher preparation should include practical training in reading instruction, composition, grammar, and teaching literary genres; the author argues that literature-heavy degree programs leave new teachers underprepared.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is aimed chiefly at secondary English teachers, department leaders, teacher educators, and literacy specialists who want practical ways to make reading instruction more responsive to average and struggling students. New teachers may find its classroom sequences especially useful: assess reading ability, choose an appropriate text, establish context, read and discuss, and guide students through a writing process. Experienced educators can use it to reconsider textbook dependence, isolated vocabulary and grammar exercises, and the time spent on individual works. The author's recommendations are most useful when treated as a framework to adapt to local students and curriculum requirements rather than as a fixed set of rules. Readers interested in literacy instruction will find a strong, experience-based argument for sustained reading, accessible challenge, culturally connected selections, and modeled writing. The book is less a literary-critical survey than a practitioner's critique of how English teachers are trained and how school curricula are organized. Compared with books focused on canonical interpretation or broad literacy research, Sinay's work is more prescriptive and classroom-centered, offering genre-by-genre methods and extensive suggested reading lists. Readers should approach its broad claims as the author's perspective, while considering how his core principles—student engagement, appropriate difficulty, explicit instruction, and measurement of growth—fit their own teaching context.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: What an English Teacher Needs to Know to Teach English

Sinay describes the unusually broad responsibilities of an English teacher: teaching novels, plays, poetry, short stories, and nonfiction while also developing students' reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and research skills. Each genre brings its own vocabulary and concepts, from plot and characterization to dramatic structure, rhetorical appeals, and logical

fallacies. Teachers also need to understand diction, syntax, historical context, and authors' backgrounds in order to help students make sense of what they read. The author argues that conventional preparation often does not equip teachers for these tasks. He particularly criticizes isolated grammar worksheets and weekly vocabulary memorization, favoring instruction connected to students' actual reading and writing. His practical implication is that English teachers must act as literacy instructors: understand students' abilities, choose appropriate material, teach the language of texts in context, and connect reading to writing and research.

Chapter 2: What Should Be the Goals of Teaching Literature?

The chapter identifies literacy growth as the primary goal of literature instruction, especially for average and below-average readers. Sinay argues that students are not in class simply to adopt their teacher's love of the canon. They need worthwhile reading that interests them and is within reach, because engagement leads to more reading and more reading supports language development. A uniform textbook, he says, often fails to meet either the cultural interests or reading levels of a diverse classroom. Literature can also cultivate empathy, critical thinking, cultural understanding, moral reflection, and the ability to detect bias. The author presents it as both a mirror of readers' own lives and a window into other experiences, invoking Atticus Finch's advice to see the world from another person's perspective. Literary terms and analysis have a place, but should not displace reading itself. Teachers can encourage lifelong reading by modeling their own reading, making time for students to read, and guiding them to support interpretations with evidence.

Chapter 3: Using the Step-Ladder Approach to Improving Literacy Through Literature

Sinay introduces the Step-Ladder Approach as an alternative to assigning classics simply because they are canonical. He defines "dead" literature for his purposes as work that is linguistically or culturally remote from the students being taught—not as work without artistic value. Teachers should first determine students' reading levels and then choose texts slightly above those levels, where readers can encounter new language without becoming overwhelmed. The method also emphasizes cultural relevance as a source of motivation. Sinay uses John Steinbeck, whose writing includes Hispanic settings and Spanish-language elements, as an example of an author who connected with many of his predominantly Hispanic students. He argues that sustained reading of manageable, engaging books better prepares students for college than struggling through texts they cannot follow. The teacher's role is to coach gradual growth, encourage broad reading, and select challenging works only when students have the background and skills to approach them.

Chapter 4: Why English Teachers Aren't Trained to Teach Literature or Anything Else

This chapter argues that teacher preparation is mismatched with the demands of the secondary English classroom. Sinay says undergraduate English degrees devote most coursework to literature, often without teaching future teachers how to teach novels, plays, poetry, reading, grammar, or composition. Education programs, in his account, tend to provide general coursework rather than discipline-specific methods. Student teaching may offer experience, but its quality depends heavily on the assigned mentor and may reproduce inconsistent practices. The author calls for English programs to include composition and rhetoric, practical grammar instruction, reading assessment, and methods for teaching each literary genre. He illustrates the writing-preparation gap with experiences in college and community-college settings, where instructors could evaluate papers without guiding students through producing them. He also contends that departments must support professional learning rather than leave new teachers to learn by trial and error at students' expense. His proposed remedy is more deliberate collaboration between English and education departments and more classroom-ready training.

Chapter 5: Why Old Literature Is Inappropriate for Average Students

Sinay recounts explaining to a student why literature matters, citing cultural knowledge, vocabulary, and the way books reveal social history. He then distinguishes those general benefits from the problem of assigning texts far beyond students' reading abilities. Great Expectations, The Scarlet Letter, and other demanding works may hold lasting value, he argues, but students who cannot understand their language or historical setting may disengage rather than grow. His experience reading The Scarlet Letter aloud to students illustrates the gap between a teacher's appreciation and students' comprehension. The chapter also challenges the assumption that difficulty alone produces literacy. Students need vocabulary, background knowledge, and enough reading competence to make meaning; historical context can help, but too much time spent explaining a text also displaces reading practice. Sinay favors accessible, appropriately challenging works such as To Kill a Mockingbird for many students, and recommends reading-level assessment and additional support for those who are behind. His broader point is that schools should not mistake a student's difficulty with an unsuitable text for laziness or indifference.

Chapter 6: Is Cultural Literacy as Important as Literacy?

The author contrasts cultural literacy—knowing major authors and works—with the ability to read effectively. A survey course in American or British literature may introduce students to figures such as Twain, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, but Sinay argues that exposure does not necessarily translate into lasting language growth, particularly when the reading is far above students' abilities. He recalls students finding The Scarlet Letter difficult and describes the struggle of teaching Hamlet to learners encountering it for the first time. Sinay argues that departments should measure students' reading growth rather than assume it. He favors vocabulary learned through context,

sustained reading, and works that challenge students without overwhelming them. Familiar literary terminology may help describe texts, but an emphasis on terms and author lists can take time away from actual reading. In his view, literacy is the more fundamental educational outcome; cultural knowledge is valuable when it supports understanding, but should not substitute for students' developing reading skills.

Chapter 7: How Not to Teach Literature as I Was in High School 1962–1966

Sinay reviews the heavy reading load he encountered in high school, including The Iliad, The Odyssey, Heart of Darkness, Great Expectations, The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick, Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales, and Paradise Lost. Although he was a student in a middle-level class rather than an honors program, many assigned works were linguistically and historically challenging. He remembers modern works such as The Great Gatsby and The Sun Also Rises as more approachable, while the historical and linguistic demands of older texts often left students without enough context to understand them deeply. The author nevertheless credits extensive reading—both assigned books and the many works he chose independently, especially Steinbeck—with helping him build literacy. His account of reading a dozen Steinbeck novels during a mismanaged chemistry class underscores his belief that voluntary, sustained reading can be powerful. The chapter's lesson is not that students should read less, but that reading should be supported and appropriately sequenced. Teachers should make reading central, encourage students to read widely, and avoid confusing sheer difficulty or volume with effective instruction.

Chapter 8: How English Should Be Taught

Sinay proposes an English program organized around students' language development. Vocabulary should be drawn from the texts students are reading and taught in meaningful sentences, rather than delivered as disconnected weekly lists. Usage should be taught systematically over time, while grammar and mechanics should be addressed in students' own writing. He argues that isolated drills often fail to transfer to authentic writing and that teachers should build instruction gradually around real examples. Writing instruction should model the writing process, with students and teacher working through a shared assignment: generating ideas, drafting, receiving feedback, revising, and editing. The chapter also emphasizes comprehension practice through questions about fiction and nonfiction, and an independent-reading program as the foundation for both literacy and stronger writing. The practical principle is to make reading, writing, vocabulary, and language instruction reinforce one another, with the teacher's choices guided by students' abilities and measurable growth.

Chapter 9: How Much Time Should It Take to Teach a Literary Work?

This chapter argues against spending excessive time on a single text. Sinay proposes roughly three to four weeks for a play, no more than six weeks for a novel, and a class period or two

for many poems and nonfiction readings. Short stories, he says, can often be read in one sitting, followed by discussion. These are recommendations rather than fixed rules, but the underlying concern is that an extended unit on one work can crowd out opportunities to read more broadly. The author recommends giving essential historical context efficiently before reading, then building understanding through discussion and useful comprehension questions. For example, students approaching The Crucible or The Scarlet Letter need a basic understanding of Puritan society, but background instruction should not become a substitute for reading. Sinay rejects the idea that slowing a book down indefinitely guarantees comprehension. In his view, students understand through reading the whole work, asking substantive questions, and discussing what they have read.

Chapter 10: Teaching a Novel

Sinay outlines a sequence for teaching a novel: select a work that fits students' reading abilities and interests; establish historical and geographical context; introduce central themes; and provide a clear schedule for in-class and independent reading. Using The Great Gatsby, he suggests orienting students to the 1920s, Long Island, and questions about the American Dream and desire. Brief discussions and comprehension questions after assigned sections help students keep track of plot, characters, and setting. Once students understand the narrative, the teacher can guide them toward symbols, themes, and evidence-based interpretations. The chapter treats writing as an essential outcome: the class develops a thesis together, finds supporting passages, drafts an essay, receives feedback, revises, and edits. Grammar and mechanics are taught during that process. Sinay cautions against allowing one novel to occupy a quarter or more; instruction should provide a focused encounter with the work and leave time for additional reading and writing.

Chapter 11: Analyzing a Novel and Drawing Conclusions

This chapter turns novel study into a practical process for generating and defending interpretations. Sinay encourages close reading, note-taking, and marking significant passages where possible. Students and teachers then discuss potential conclusions, record several possible topics, and decide which theme or character would support a focused essay. The interpretation need not be the only possible one, but it must be supported by evidence from the book. The example of The Scarlet Letter shows how a student might argue that Hester is not the only sinner in her community, using the townspeople's behavior as evidence. Students can turn such a conclusion into a thesis, organize supporting points, and select quotations. The teacher models drafting, peer review, revision, and editing, including a few targeted lessons in grammar and usage drawn from the drafts. Sinay recommends keeping literary theory accessible: high-school students need a clear foundation in interpretation and evidence before being asked to manage multiple complex critical frameworks.

Chapter 12: How to Teach a Play

Sinay argues that plays should be experienced as performances rather than stretched into semester-long reading exercises. He describes teaching The Crucible by having students follow a professional audio performance, listen act by act, and answer comprehension questions. Before listening, students receive concise historical context—in this case, the Salem Witch Trials—so they can understand the world of the play. Students then discuss what happens and clarify misunderstandings before proceeding. After the play is understood, the class draws conclusions about its characters or themes and writes about them. Sinay favors guided, collaborative essay instruction over a test that checks plot recall but does little for literacy. Depending on available resources, teachers can use live or recorded performances, video, or student readings. The central recommendation is to make the play engaging, keep the unit focused, and model how to turn a performance and discussion into a written argument.

Chapter 13: Teaching Poetry

The author recommends making poetry accessible and enjoyable rather than beginning with an extensive inventory of poetic devices. Using William Blake's "The Lamb," he models a sequence: clarify unfamiliar words, identify who is speaking and to whom, discuss what the poem states, and guide students toward a reasonable interpretation. Students consider the lamb's innocence and the speaker's account of its creator, then use lines from the poem to support their conclusions. Blake's "The Tyger" offers a contrasting case. Students identify the speaker's questions about who created the tiger and connect those questions to the earlier poem, arriving at the more complicated idea that the same creator may have made both innocence and fearful power. Sinay uses questioning and shared thesis-writing to show how interpretation develops, rather than simply telling students what a poem means. Literary devices are introduced when they clarify the reading, not as an end in themselves, and students write short, evidence-based responses.

Chapter 14: Teaching Short Stories

Sinay presents short stories as an efficient way to read, discuss, and write within a compact unit. Teachers should introduce essential context and pre-teach only vocabulary likely to interfere with comprehension. He particularly recommends reading the story aloud while students follow along, modeling fluency and giving students a chance to hear language and characterization. His own animated readings of stories by Irving and Poe helped bring characters and narrators to life for students. After reading, comprehension questions help students reconstruct what happened and distinguish stated from implied meaning. The class can then develop a thesis about the story and identify incidents that support it. Sinay uses "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" as an example of a story whose characters repeat earlier mistakes after receiving a chance to become young again. Rather than spending extensive time on terminology such as plot or setting, teachers should guide students through the story's meaning and make interpretation feel like an engaging investigation.

Chapter 15: Teaching Nonfiction

Nonfiction, in Sinay's approach, supplies an important route into argumentative reading and writing. He recommends selecting current or controversial material—such as editorials, speeches, scientific writing, legal documents, or other public texts—so students can identify a claim, decide whether they agree, and assess its support. He connects this work to California's Expository Reading and Writing Course, developed in response to concerns that many incoming college students needed additional preparation in English. Instruction begins with vocabulary when necessary, a complete reading, and comprehension questions that clarify the author's argument. Students then write a response: they may support the author's position or challenge it with a counterargument and evidence. As with other genres, Sinay urges teachers to model the essay-writing process for the class before expecting students to work independently. The chapter's central formula is that reading nonfiction should lead students to examine claims and evidence, then practice making their own arguments.

Chapter 16: Teaching the Literary Essay

Sinay describes the literary essay as an argument that persuades readers that an interpretation of a work is credible. Using The Catcher in the Rye, he guides students from discussion of Holden Caulfield to a possible claim that Holden is an angry young man who acts out. The class identifies supporting incidents, such as Holden's profanity and his contemptuous descriptions of others, and uses that evidence to construct a thesis. The teacher then models the parts of the essay: an introduction that identifies the author and work and leads to the thesis; body paragraphs that integrate quotations and explain their relevance; and a conclusion that restates the argument and clarifies its significance. Students draft, receive feedback, and revise rather than being left alone with a finished-paper assignment. The chapter repeatedly stresses that students need to see each stage demonstrated. Its practical lesson is that literary interpretation and writing skills develop together when teachers make the reasoning visible.

Chapter 17: Teaching the Argumentative Essay

This chapter contrasts assigning writing with teaching it. Sinay recalls school and college experiences in which students submitted essays only to receive heavy correction, with little help generating ideas or revising before evaluation. He argues that writing is a process: writers define and narrow a topic, develop ideas, gather evidence, draft, seek feedback, revise, and edit. Professional writers use multiple drafts and input from others, so students should have opportunities to do the same. The author emphasizes modeling a shared assignment before asking students to write independently. He also criticizes departments that fail to discuss composition instruction or provide professional learning, arguing that teachers must keep developing their practice. A workable classroom sequence includes a common topic, peer response, teacher guidance, and multiple revisions, completed within a reasonable

timeframe. Sinay's broader point is that an argumentative paper should be taught as a set of learnable decisions—not simply assigned and judged after the fact.

Chapter 18: Going Rogue to Teach Literature Effectively

Sinay uses "going rogue" to mean taking responsibility for adapting the curriculum when textbooks do not fit students' reading levels or interests. He proposes organizing courses by genres—short stories, novels, plays, poetry, and nonfiction—and choosing works suited to the students in each class. A year might include two novels and two plays, with essays written in response; grammar and mechanics would be taught while students revise those essays rather than through disconnected drills. The chapter recommends preparing materials in advance, including contextual notes, vocabulary support, comprehension questions, and writing prompts. Sinay gives examples such as The Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies, "The Lottery," and Poe stories, while stressing that selections should be adapted rather than treated as a universal list. He also suggests using AI to help create questions and prompts. The curriculum's measure of success, he argues, should be whether students read more, understand their texts, and grow as writers—not whether the textbook was followed page by page.

Chapter 19: A Literature Program for Junior Hispanic Students

Sinay proposes a literature program for a junior class with many Hispanic students, emphasizing works that offer linguistic accessibility and connections to Hispanic histories and experiences. John Steinbeck is the chapter's central recommendation: The Pearl explores exploitation and the destructive promise of wealth; Tortilla Flat presents a communal, anti-materialist way of life; Viva Zapata! addresses revolution and political power; and The Forgotten Village and Sea of Cortez offer nonfiction possibilities. These works can support discussion of inequality, identity, community, and social justice. The author suggests building background knowledge with photographs, maps, and historical material, and using film adaptations selectively to help students compare representation with the text. He also lists possible readings across grade levels and genres, including Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya, Elizabeth Acevedo, Sonia Nazario, Luis Valdez, and Javier Zamora. The recommendations are intended as starting points for teacher-designed programs, not a requirement to devote a whole semester to one author. Sinay's guiding claim is that relevant texts can create stronger participation and shared classroom discussion.

Chapter 20: A Second Hispanic Reading Program for Juniors

This chapter expands the junior-year recommendations to a range of Hispanic American writers whose works address identity, history, migration, and the American experience. Sinay discusses Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street for its vignettes and narrative voice; Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima for its Southwestern setting and spiritual conflicts; Julia Alvarez's novels for immigrant and political histories; Luis Alberto Urrea's The Devil's

Highway for investigative nonfiction; and Elizabeth Acevedo's verse novels for Afro-Latina identity and family expectations. Short stories provide a bridge between longer works. The chapter points to Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek," Helena María Viramontes's "The Moths," Julia Alvarez's "The Gift," and other examples for teaching folklore, symbolism, coming-of-age, narrative voice, and cultural transition. Sinay encourages teachers to research and select works they can teach effectively, then prepare questions and supports that make them accessible. He predicts that a curriculum with meaningful cultural connections can increase participation, while the instructional goal remains reading and analysis rather than identity matching alone.

Chapter 21: A Reading Program for African-American Students

Sinay offers a broad list of African American writing for students from freshman through senior year. Suggested novels include Dear Martin and The Hate U Give for contemporary questions of race and policing, James as a reimagining of Huckleberry Finn from Jim's perspective, and works by Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison. The selections span contemporary young-adult fiction, the Harlem Renaissance, and major works exploring racism, identity, slavery, and gender. The proposed program also includes short stories by Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, and others; plays such as A Raisin in the Sun, Pipeline, and Fences; poetry by Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, and Amiri Baraka; and nonfiction by Maya Angelou, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King Jr. The list is intended as a foundation for a curriculum that gives students access to a wider literary tradition. Teachers would still need to match particular works to reading levels, classroom needs, and available time.

Chapter 22: A Reading Program for Asian American Students

This chapter proposes Asian American and Asian diasporic writing across genres and grade levels. The novel list includes Celeste Ng, Malinda Lo, Amy Tan, Gene Luen Yang, and Stacey Lee, with works addressing family expectations, cultural identity, immigration, history, and gender. Short-story possibilities include Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie," Viet Thanh Nguyen's stories, Amy Tan's "Rules of the Game," Gish Jen's "The White Umbrella," and Souvankham Thammavongsa's "How to Pronounce Knife." The recommendations extend to plays, poetry, and graphic memoirs. Examples include Lauren Yee's Cambodian Rock Band, David Henry Hwang's Yellow Face, Ocean Vuong's Night Sky with Exit Wounds, and memoirs such as The Best We Could Do and They Called Us Enemy. Sinay presents these works as ways to bring varied histories and experiences into English classrooms, while the book's larger framework still applies: choose texts students can engage with, provide needed context, and use reading to build literacy and writing skills.

Chapter 23: A Reading Program for White Students

Sinay argues that cultural relevance should apply to white students as well as students from other backgrounds, and that reading choices can also reflect regional interests. His suggested novels include A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, To Kill a Mockingbird, The Awakening, The Catcher in the Rye, A Christmas Carol, and Animal Farm. The short-story and play lists include familiar works by Shirley Jackson, Kate Chopin, Edgar Allan Poe, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Shakespeare, among others. The chapter also suggests poetry by Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, and Marilyn Nelson, as well as nonfiction such as George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." Sinay describes the list as provisional: teachers should adjust the selections to student reading levels, local interests, and classroom context. The larger argument is that tailoring a program to students is not a strategy only for minority groups; all readers benefit from work that is accessible and engaging.

Chapter 24: Teaching Junior English: A Model for All Grade Levels

Sinay uses junior-year American literature to demonstrate how a required survey can be organized without allowing a textbook to dictate every lesson. He describes arranging material into historical and literary units—from colonial and revolutionary writing through Romanticism, realism, modernism, and contemporary literature. Authors such as Poe, Twain, Wharton, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Salinger can be studied through works that connect literary history with reading, vocabulary, and writing. Unit assessments should check comprehension, while language instruction belongs in the work students are doing rather than in unrelated drills. The chapter then returns to the need for reading instruction: assess students' levels, distinguish instructional from frustrating texts, teach vocabulary in context, ask questions that develop comprehension, and provide sustained silent and independent reading. Sinay recommends reading aloud to model fluency and using pre- and post-assessments to track growth. Students who are substantially behind may need additional reading support. Although titled as a model for junior English and other grade levels, the chapter's practical framework is broader: build an organized course around students' needs and make measurable literacy development the priority.

Notable Quotes

> *"“Everything an English teacher teaches should advance the students' literacy. Do not sacrifice literacy for literature.”"*

> *"“The main goal of teaching literature to average and below-average students is to advance students' literacy.”"*

> *"“Reading is the primary vehicle for advancing a student's literacy, and choosing engaging literature will get them to read.”"*

"“Students should be challenged by the literature they read, but not overwhelmed.”"

"“Teaching writing is coaxing the students through the process of writing a paper.”"

"“Reading is like any other skill–practice improves it.”"

Full Summary

Sinay argues that teaching English demands far more than discussing books, yet new teachers often arrive without preparation for much of the work. They must teach novels, plays, poetry, short stories, and nonfiction, each with its own vocabulary: from plot, theme, and point of view to dramatic irony, soliloquy, and stage directions. They also need to understand argument, including rhetorical appeals such as ethos, logos, and pathos, and fallacies such as ad hominem attacks and hasty generalizations. Beyond literature, they are responsible for reading, writing, grammar, usage, mechanics, vocabulary, and research papers. Sinay objects to teaching grammar as isolated worksheets, arguing that it is more useful in the context of students' writing. Reading also supports spelling and language growth. Crucially, teachers need to know how to assess students' reading abilities and choose material accordingly. The teacher's task is not simply to impart literary knowledge, but to help students become more capable users of language.

The central goal of literature instruction, Sinay insists, should be improving literacy and encouraging students to become lifelong readers. Literature can cultivate empathy, critical thinking, awareness of bias, and reflection on moral questions, but those benefits depend on students engaging with what they read. For average and below-average students, engagement is more likely when a work is culturally recognizable and linguistically within reach. Sinay criticizes textbook anthologies as one-size-fits-all curricula that often fail on both counts. He contrasts them with the custom-designed reading programs offered to honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate students: if advanced learners receive carefully selected material, he asks, why should average learners be left with books they may struggle to read? Literary terminology can aid understanding, but it should not take precedence over reading itself. Teachers should model independent reading, including by reading alongside students and sharing what they are reading.

Sinay calls his alternative the Step-Ladder Approach. Teachers first determine students' reading levels, then select texts roughly one grade above those levels, so that the language provides a manageable challenge. A student reading at a tenth-grade level, for instance, might read works around the eleventh-grade level. The point is gradual growth: students should encounter some unfamiliar language, but not so much that comprehension and motivation collapse. Sinay rejects the assumption that difficult classics automatically raise students' literacy. After decades of teaching, he says, he saw students abandon works that

were both linguistically daunting and culturally distant. Modern, relatable writing can provide a cognitive foothold, making it easier to follow the story while learning new language. He recalls Hispanic students responding to John Steinbeck, whose settings and use of Spanish could feel familiar to them. The aim is not to ban classics, but to avoid treating them as a universal prescription. Sustained reading of accessible, challenging books is better preparation for college than struggling through books students cannot understand.

The difficulty, Sinay argues, begins with teacher preparation. English majors may complete dozens of units in literature, but receive little or no instruction in how to teach literary genres, composition, grammar, or reading. Literature professors generally lecture on a work's history and significance; they do not necessarily demonstrate how to teach it to adolescents. Sinay recalls a professor criticizing his paper on Paradise Lost for being too broad, without guiding him through narrowing the topic. Education programs, meanwhile, emphasize general courses on child development rather than subject-specific methods. Student teaching offers no reliable remedy: a mentor may not be an effective teacher, and a student teacher may simply inherit that mentor's methods. Sinay also faults departments for failing to prepare English teachers to teach composition, despite assigning students essays themselves. He calls for courses in composition, rhetoric, grammar, and reading, arguing that otherwise teachers learn on the job, with students bearing the cost.

Sinay describes how he once justified difficult assigned reading to a student who asked why the class had to read "this stuff." He cited cultural literacy—the value of knowing Shakespeare, Twain, and other celebrated writers—and argued that reading expands vocabulary. Yet he later recognized that the more important question was whether the selected works actually helped students grow. A ninth-grade class required to read Dickens's Great Expectations, a work Sinay identifies as far beyond many students' reading levels, could meet it at a frustrating distance. Students might grasp fragments but give up when the language overwhelms them. The same problem arose when he read Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter aloud with animation: he admired the novel, but his students remained lost in its archaic language and the Puritan world they did not know. He asks whether instruction exists to preserve classics for their own sake or to develop students' literacy. Books such as To Kill a Mockingbird, he argues, can be readable and relatable while still offering a worthwhile challenge.

Cultural literacy, in Sinay's view, is not as important as literacy itself. A survey of American literature may introduce students to Twain, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson, but if the works are beyond their reach, it may teach names and historical facts without substantially improving their reading. He says English departments rarely measure students' language growth, making it difficult to know whether a curriculum works. In his own reading classes, he used assessments and saw gains on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills; he argues that pre- and post-testing can both reveal progress and motivate students.

Vocabulary, too, should be learned through reading in context rather than memorized from weekly lists. Students need texts that challenge them without overwhelming them, and literary analysis should follow, not replace, the development of reading ability.

Sinay's account of his own high school years, from 1962 to 1966 at La Habra High School, illustrates the mismatch. Even though he was in a B-level class, he and his classmates read The Iliad, The Odyssey, Heart of Darkness, Ivanhoe, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, Great Expectations, The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick, and many other demanding works. Some were abridged; others, including The Scarlet Letter, were not. In senior year they encountered Beowulf, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and a 700-page Somerset Maugham novel, often without the historical or linguistic background to understand them. Sinay nevertheless remembers a teacher who encouraged his reading and helped his writing. He found his own step-ladder in Hemingway and Steinbeck, and read widely outside class, including twelve Steinbeck novels during a chemistry course taught by an English teacher who admitted he knew no chemistry. The experience taught him how powerful sustained reading could be, but also that students need appropriate texts and guidance rather than an unexamined sink-or-swim curriculum.

Sinay's alternative is to make every part of English instruction serve students' linguistic growth. Vocabulary should come from the works they are reading, studied in context and assessed for actual growth rather than recalled for a Friday quiz. Usage should be taught systematically, while grammar and mechanics should be addressed through students' own writing. Writing itself should be modeled as a process: students generate ideas, develop an argument, draft, receive feedback, revise, and edit. Reading is the foundation for that writing, and comprehension should be practiced through questions that clarify what students understand and what they have missed. Teachers should encourage sustained, independent reading and select literature that matches students' abilities and cultural interests. For Sinay, the English classroom should be organized around literacy—not around covering a fixed canon or accumulating literary terms.

Sinay argues that each literary work should receive enough time for students to experience and understand it, but not so much that one title consumes the reading program. He has seen a play occupy a semester and a novel more than ten weeks; neither duration, he says, guarantees better comprehension. A play should ideally be heard or watched as a performance, then discussed and written about, and a month should be sufficient for the reading and related work. A novel should take no more than six weeks. Historical and social background matters, especially for works such as The Crucible and The Scarlet Letter, which require students to know something about Puritan life, but that preparation should take only a class or two. Short stories are made to be read in one sitting, while a poem may need one or two periods. Nonfiction generally calls for one period of reading and perhaps another for discussion. For Sinay, comprehension grows through thoughtful questions and discussion, not

by stretching a work out indefinitely; the priority is to encounter more writing and strengthen literacy.

Teaching a novel begins with choosing one that fits the class both linguistically and culturally. The teacher should know students' reading abilities and select a book that challenges them without overwhelming them. Before reading The Great Gatsby, for example, students need a brief picture of America in the 1920s and a sense of New York and Long Island, including where Gatsby's house might be. The teacher can introduce the novel's central questions: whether people can achieve their dreams, what the American Dream means, and what someone might do to win the love of a person already committed to another. A synopsis and a reading schedule establish what students will read in class and at home. After each assignment, brief discussion and comprehension questions keep the class oriented to plot, characters, and setting. Students can work together to answer questions, while the teacher clarifies confusion or recaps a chapter when necessary. Discussion can also draw attention to imagery and symbols, but interpretation must remain grounded in what the text supports.

Sinay's approach moves from understanding a novel's events to drawing defensible conclusions about its meaning. Students should read attentively, noting striking passages and ideas; if possible, a second reading can deepen their understanding. Since school copies cannot be marked, the teacher can model annotation on the board or encourage students to practice in pencil and erase their notes, or to use a copy of their own. Class discussion then generates possible conclusions. Students record these ideas and consider which might become the focus of an essay: a theme, or a character's development. A student writing about sin in The Scarlet Letter, for instance, might argue that Hester is not the only sinner in the community; the townspeople condemn her publicly while concealing their own wrongdoing. That claim must be supported with passages from the novel. Students organize evidence into an outline, then draft, exchange feedback in small groups, revise, and edit with the teacher's help. At this level, Sinay cautions against multiplying interpretive theories or critical approaches. Students need the basic skills of interpretation, not the specialist vocabulary of graduate study.

A play, he says, should be encountered as performance rather than prolonged as a slow, line-by-line exercise. When Sinay taught The Crucible, students followed the text while listening to a professional audio production, completing the play in four or five days. Before Act One, he supplied historical context about Salem and the witch trials of the 1690s; the play's later connection to McCarthyism could wait, since presenting two historical frameworks at once might confuse students. After each act, comprehension questions guided discussion, often in groups that reported their answers to the class. Students first established what was happening, then drew conclusions about the play or a character. His class chose to write about John Proctor. A live performance or video production can also help, as can students reading different roles, although that depends on having capable readers. Vocabulary and

dramatic terms should be clarified when they help understanding, not allowed to dominate. Rather than relying on an objective test, Sinay favors a guided character-analysis essay, with the teacher modeling the writing process. The aim is to make drama enjoyable and give students an experience closer to seeing a play onstage.

Poetry instruction, too, should feel inviting rather than punitive. Sinay's example is William Blake's "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," contrasting poems that can be approached through questions rather than a catalogue of devices. Before reading, the teacher clears up unfamiliar words. Then the class asks who is speaking and to whom. In "The Lamb," the speaker addresses the animal and identifies its maker as God; students can infer that the lamb represents innocence and gentleness, and that its creator is good. In "The Tyger," the speaker asks who could make such a fearful creature, and finally wonders whether the maker of the lamb also made the tiger. The class can reason toward the more troubling implication that the same God created both innocence and danger. Sinay uses questions, discussion, and humor—including his joking paraphrase, "Who's your daddy?"—to draw students into interpretation. Once the class reaches a reasonable conclusion, students help shape a thesis and use lines from the poem as evidence in a short paper. A conclusion need not be perfect or singular; it must be plausible and supported. Poetic devices are explained when relevant, but memorizing terminology is not the route to understanding.

A short story can be read aloud in one class period, with the teacher modeling fluent, expressive reading. Sinay recalls voicing characters such as Rip Van Winkle, Ichabod Crane, and Roderick Usher, making the story audible and vivid for students who may rarely have heard one read aloud. Beforehand, teachers should briefly establish when and where the story takes place, introduce the writer, and teach difficult words in sentences drawn from the text. After the reading, prepared comprehension questions help reveal what students understood and what needs clarification. In "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," students can conclude that three men who once competed for Widow Wycherly's love repeat their old mistakes after drinking from the Fountain of Youth. The class develops a thesis together and identifies episodes that support it. For Sinay, teaching short fiction is less about naming plot, conflict, and symbolism than about using questions to uncover stated and implied meaning—something like solving a detective story.

Nonfiction should give students an issue they can investigate and take a position on. Controversial readings offer opposing claims and a reason to write: after an editorial arguing that women should have the right to choose, students might agree with its reasoning or challenge it with their own. Sinay connects this work to California's Expository Reading and Writing Course, or ERWC, developed in 2003 by CSU faculty and high school teachers after many incoming students were found unprepared for college English. Its modules use contemporary materials such as editorials, scientific articles, speeches, legal documents, and visual media. Sinay notes that remedial courses had been created because students

struggled to argue effectively, a problem he attributes in part to inadequate preparation in teaching writing. Teachers should select accessible readings that engage students, prepare essential vocabulary, read the whole piece promptly, and use comprehension questions to clarify its claims. Students then write a response, either supporting the author or countering the argument with their own thesis. The teacher should model this essay with the class before expecting students to work independently.

The literary essay is itself an argument: its writer must persuade readers that an interpretation is valid. Sinay illustrates the process through J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye. After reading the book, the class discusses it through Socratic and comprehension questions, arriving at the interpretation that Holden Caulfield is an angry young man who acts out his anger. Students gather evidence together: Holden swears at God, calls the students at Pencey Prep "morons," and repeatedly berates others. With that evidence in hand, the class drafts a thesis that states the claim and gives the paper a clear direction. Students learn to introduce the author and book, supply brief context, and create an opening that draws readers in. The teacher models a body paragraph on the board, showing how to introduce quotations, use them accurately, and explain how each supports the argument. Students draft their own introductions and papers, receive feedback, and revise. The conclusion restates the argument and adds a final comment that makes the case clear. Rather than assigning an essay and judging only the finished product, the teacher demonstrates each move and guides students through it, so they can gradually undertake the same work with less support.

For the argumentative essay, Sinay insists that assigning a paper is not the same as teaching students to write one. Students should first work through a shared essay, learning how to choose and narrow a topic, generate ideas, organize them, gather supporting material, draft, receive feedback, revise, and edit. The sequence is not meant to be a rigid formula; it makes visible the work that experienced writers do. Sinay contrasts this with his own schooling, where teachers returned essays covered in red ink but offered no prior guidance or opportunity to rewrite. He argues that students need feedback while a draft can still be improved, and that teachers should learn composition methods themselves rather than expecting students to master writing by trial and error. Recalling composition scholar Ross Winterowd's influence on writing instruction, Sinay criticizes departments that rarely discuss the subject or support teachers' professional learning. A five- to seven-page research paper, he says, should not consume an entire semester. The aim is to prepare students to write independently, not to leave them guessing at expectations.

That same insistence on professional judgment informs Sinay's call to "go rogue" against textbook-driven curricula. He proposes organizing English courses around genres and selecting works that fit students' assessed reading abilities and cultural interests. Students might study short stories, novels, plays, poetry, and nonfiction across the year, with longer works followed by guided essays. Grammar, usage, and mechanics would be taught while

students revise, rather than detached from their writing. Short stories, poems, and controversial nonfiction could provide additional opportunities for discussion and writing. Sinay suggests preparing lessons and materials in advance, so teachers can build a coherent curriculum instead of following a textbook's one-size-fits-all sequence. He sees artificial intelligence as one possible aid in generating comprehension questions, prompts, and assessment tools, while leaving the essential work of choosing suitable readings to teachers.

The proposed reading lists make this approach concrete. For Hispanic juniors, Sinay first champions John Steinbeck, whose works connect with Mexican and paisano histories while remaining linguistically approachable. The Pearl follows Kino, an Indigenous pearl diver, and examines exploitation and the destructive promise of wealth; Tortilla Flat portrays Monterey paisanos whose communal priorities challenge conventional ideas of property and success. Viva Zapata! opens discussion of revolution, land reform, and political power, while The Forgotten Village and The Log from the Sea of Cortez offer nonfiction perspectives on Mexican communities and culture. Sinay suggests preparing students with maps, photographs, and historical background, then using questions such as whether Danny's house in Tortilla Flat is a burden or a blessing to explore competing values. A second program widens the range of Hispanic American voices: Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street, Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima, Julia Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies, Luis Alberto Urrea's The Devil's Highway, and Elizabeth Acevedo's verse novel The Poet X. Short stories by Cisneros, Helena María Viramontes, and Junot Díaz can introduce folklore, coming-of-age themes, and varied narrative voices without the commitment of a novel.

For African-American students, Sinay proposes reading across novels, stories, plays, poetry, and nonfiction, rather than treating Black writing as a marginal addition. His suggested novels range from Angie Thomas's The Hate U Give and Nic Stone's Dear Martin to Richard Wright's Native Son, Toni Morrison's Beloved, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. Stories include Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson," Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," and Hurston's "Sweat." Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, Dominique Morisseau's Pipeline, and August Wilson's Fences offer dramatic possibilities, while Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Amiri Baraka anchor the poetry suggestions. Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, W. E. B. Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" provide nonfiction choices.

For Asian American students, the suggested works likewise span different experiences and forms. Celeste Ng's Everything I Never Told You introduces family expectations and identity; Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club explores relationships between immigrant mothers and American-born daughters. Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie," Viet Thanh Nguyen's stories, and Gish Jen's "The White Umbrella" offer short-fiction entry points. The plays include Cambodian Rock Band by Lauren Yee and David Henry Hwang's Yellow Face. Poetry

selections range from Garret Hongo to Ocean Vuong, while graphic memoirs such as Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do, Robin Ha's Almost American Girl, and George Takei's They Called Us Enemy connect personal history to migration, war, and incarceration. Sinay also offers a program for white students, emphasizing that it too should respond to reading level, interest, and place. Suggested novels include A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, To Kill a Mockingbird, The Catcher in the Rye, and A Christmas Carol; stories include Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour." Plays such as Inherit the Wind, Our Town, and Hamlet sit alongside poetry by Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson, and nonfiction by Henry David Thoreau and George Orwell.

Sinay's final teaching model uses junior English, where California's American-literature requirement can be organized into historical units rather than approached randomly. His own units included Puritan writing, revolutionary literature, Gothic writers such as Poe and Hawthorne, realists including Twain, Henry James, and Edith Wharton, modernists such as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner, and contemporary authors including Salinger and Amy Tan. Historical context helps students understand what works reflect, while unit tests focus on comprehension rather than isolated vocabulary or grammar drills. Those language skills, he argues, are better developed through reading and writing.

The model also makes assessment and practice central. Teachers should determine students' reading abilities, consider each book's readability, and choose material at an instructional level: challenging enough to support growth, but not so difficult that students become frustrated and lose comprehension. Sinay distinguishes this from recreational reading, which may be easier, and from the frustration level, where unfamiliar language blocks understanding. He recommends sustained silent reading in class, an independent-reading program, and teachers reading aloud to model fluency and pronunciation. Comprehension questions should follow reading and range from basic understanding to more complex interpretation; vocabulary should come from the texts students actually read. Pre- and post-tests can show whether reading skills have grown, rather than leaving teachers to assume that assigned literature has done the work. Students who are substantially behind may need additional reading support, not simply the same book as their classmates.

Sinay's program therefore asks English teachers to act as reading teachers as well as instructors of literature and writing. Assessment should guide the choice of books, and students should read often enough to build stamina and independence. Writing should grow from what they read, while grammar and usage instruction should arise from the sentences they are trying to improve. The measure of a successful English course is not how many canonical works or literary terms it covers, but whether students understand what they read, can support their interpretations, and leave more able and willing to read on their own.

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