

English Language Arts FAQ

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These are some questions I have been asked by parents and students, both at Jonesport-Beals High School and other places.

What are your rules for your classroom?

What will we study in English?

What if I have questions about the work, or if I don't understand something?

What will we be reading and writing?

Why is there so much about history, science, and other stuff in an English class?

Is that it – reading and projects?

What about studying grammar? When will we do that?

Will we have vocabulary lists?

Will there be worksheets?

What if I don't like what we will be reading?

What if I don't like to write or speak in front of the class?

How will we be graded?

Why is this so subjective?

What are your rules for your classroom? In addition to school rules like no food and only water to drink in classrooms, no hats, no cell phones, and other behaviors mentioned in the student hand book:

- Respect yourselves and others.
- Be aware of yourself as a learner.
- Be on task
- Don't be a distraction.
- Support your ideas with evidence.
- Be honest and expect honesty in return.
- I am the captain and I decide the direction of our sail.

What will we study in English? The main focus of English is communication. We will work to become the kind of communicators others want to hire or work for. Communication is a two-way exercise. It is important for you to read well, and listen to others attentively; this is how others communicate to you. You must also be able to write effectively and speak in public; this is how you communicate with others. You must be able to think critically, weigh the words of others, select the words you choose to use. You must make connections between your life and ideas and the lives and ideas of others as you read about them, witness them, and hear about them. Everything we do in English class is meant to help you become a better reader, writer, thinker, speaker, presenter – a better member of your community here in Downeast Maine as well as the world at large.

What if I have questions about the work, or if I don't understand something? This is what I'm here for. I am available from 7:30am until the Pledge, during Learning Lab, and after school. I will work with you until you understand what you need to know. If you would rather not ask a question during class, that is fine. At the end of every class you will pass me an exit slip that includes, among other things, any questions you need answered. If it addresses a confusion I suspect others

are having, I will bring it up in class without naming any names.

What will we be reading and writing? We will read a mixture of fiction and non-fiction. Sometimes this will include poetry and drama. There will be a variety of long and short texts to read. Students will be writing essays. I will try to group the work around themed units that provide a context for our efforts.

For example, if we are reading *A Secret Life of Bees*, we will read an article from a scientific bee keeping journal as well as newspaper stories written during the early 60s in the US and exploring what a newspaper can tell us about the cultural and political climate of an era. We will also read an essay by someone who is in search of a lost past and compare that with the journey of Lily in the novel. This exploration will be done in class with support for students' note taking skills, research strategies, and opportunities to discuss what they are learning about the context of the novel. These in class activities will provide a model for the larger project students will be working on while we read and discuss the novel.

For the larger project students will explore a theme that is included in the novel. Students have choice in this. The themes are not assigned, although we make a list of possible themes as a class. Students will need to make connections between the novel (or whatever we are reading as a class) and other ideas. They will need to refer to other people's ideas and document the sources of their information.

Why is there so much about history, science, and other stuff in an English class? Literature is both fiction and non-fiction. It is not written in a vacuum. In order to understand what has been written in the past, we need to understand a picture of the world the writing came from. Sometimes that means understanding foreign countries. Other times we need to know the technological situation of the people we are reading about. When we read *Endurance* about Ernest Shackleton's expedition to Antarctica, it was useful to know that World War I was starting, that film had recently become transportable, that they had no means of communication with anyone off the boat. Comparing weather then and now in the southern hemisphere also added to the interest of the book. One of the big lessons English allows us to learn is that nothing happens in a vacuum, that there are ramifications of everything. Literature allows us to explore some of those ramifications and practice our understanding of history, science, and “other stuff.”

Is that it – reading and projects? No. We will also be doing skills exercises. While students are working on a big project for a themed unit we will also be doing some shorter reading and writing activities that may link to the larger project, and are designed to provide the kind of exercise that anyone needs to practice to build a skill. Participation in these activities is essential. They will make you a better reader, writer, listener, and speaker. Some of the things we will work on are developing thesis statements and paragraphs, focusing questions, analysis of data, inferences and implications, citing evidence, and scaffolding large projects.

What about studying grammar? When will we do that? Grammar is part of all reading and writing. By the time a student reaches 9th grade they have been well drilled in parts of speech and how to correctly form a tense. Students should know the difference between “their” and “there” and how to make nouns and verbs agree in number and gender. Students need to *care* enough to use the correct forms. It is often easier to recognize errors in someone else's work, so we will practice peer editing as a way to become more reliable self-editors. Some of the skill practice we do will focus specifically on grammar. There is a site, noredink.com, that provides exercises for students who

enjoy grammar drills. There will be occasional assignments at this site.

High school students mostly need to know the rules associated with writing: citing your sources, using rich vocabulary appropriately, varying sentence length, organizing your ideas, defending your ideas with evidence, how to skillfully transitioning from one idea to the next, and from thesis to supporting evidence. Students will also acquire the vocabulary that will allow us to discuss the business of reading and writing. These are all things we will address as a class. Other issues I will take up with individual students as the needs arise.

Will we have vocabulary lists? The primary focus of vocabulary work will be on how a reader deals with unknown vocabulary as they are reading. Students will learn and practice strategies for learning new words, and for noticing when they have encountered a new word (rather than just skipping it) – or a familiar word in a new context. Vocabulary lists will be developed from the reading we do. As we encounter words, in context, that are unfamiliar to students, we will add those to the “list of the week.” There will also be whole school vocabulary words, used and discussed during Learning Lab, that will appear on the list.

Students will work at moving words from their “passive vocabulary,” words they recognize and somewhat understand, to their “active vocabulary,” words they are able to use easily in their conversation and writing. They will become familiar with the nuances of syntax. They will also become familiar with the various registers of our language and how they apply to vocabulary choice. Students will need to practice using the words in context.

Will there be worksheets? There will be graphic organizers, yes. These will help in keeping track of characters, ideas, and events in what we are reading. Students will learn how the organizers can be used in other classes to keep track of ideas and information. They will also help you realize and understand connections among these characters, ideas, and events. There will also be forms to fill out that are, in part, proof of reading. These forms are designed to give you a place to collect evidence for the ideas you will be discussing and writing about. They will also reveal the structure the author used and provide a model for your own writing. I expect you to reference these forms as we discuss a text.

There will not be worksheets that are objective in nature, with right and wrong answers. In life those are the things we look up on the Internet – or in some other reference source such as TV, radio, a personal interview, an old photo among other things. We must always cite the location so we can return to the source as needed. The larger job of a high school student is to learn to think for themselves, be persuasive, and marshal evidence to convince others of the strength of their ideas.

What if I don't like what we will be reading? You will have to do the reading anyway. Here are some complaints I have heard along with my replies:

- “I can't understand this.” Sometimes the problem is lack of background knowledge for the information in the text. Part of my job is to supply that background knowledge. A larger part is to teach students how to find a context themselves. In any case we will work until you do understand it.
- “This has nothing to do with me.” Much of what we will be reading, writing, and thinking about has to do with the world beyond immediate friends, facebook, familiar community. It also provides students with knowledge of the world apart from where they live. They will learn to make connections between living in their comfort zone and ideas outside that zone. They

will also learn to look at their own lives and see how those can fit into an unknown future.

- “This is boring / stupid.” Often this really means that the person doesn't want to put in the work required to understand the text. Once a student puts in the effort to understand the novel / short story / essay / article, they come to appreciate some of the author's messages, and find the writing much less boring. Sometimes it means the student disagrees with what is written. Only by understanding another's point of view can we effectively argue against it.
- “I'd rather read _____ again.” Students often don't remember that a beloved book, like *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen, was once new territory. They frequently have more than one friend; there will be more than one book they can love and re-read. School is about exploring new territory. We re-visit old favorites to apply a changed perspective.
- “When can it be my choice?” If there is a book, of an appropriate reading level, that the class as a whole is willing to commit to, we'll see what can be done, if not this year then next. Students also have a huge choice in how they address the writing and presentations that go along with any reading unit. This is where I apply my belief that there are “no wrong answers, only undefended ones.” I may have an opinion about a piece of writing that a student may or may not share. My concern as a teacher is that each student be able to clearly explain their position in a well thought out thesis statement and defend it by citing evidence to support their ideas. There will be plenty of opportunity for students to choose what they read in support of their own projects.

What if I don't like to write or speak in front of the class? This, as well, is something you must learn how to do. Presentations are something people need to do whether in college, to a boss or co-worker, in town meeting, or among friends. Speaking effectively helps insure your success in life. We will practice strategies for effective public speaking. Students are, as an audience, polite to each other and take their cue from the way the speaker behaves. If a speaker behaves seriously as they give their presentations, the audience will be serious and polite. If a student chooses to act the clown in front of the class, the class will want to respond in kind in spite of the penalty to their “listening” grade. Students will learn how to present themselves seriously, use technology to focus a presentation, be persuasive, informative, or engage in debate. In very special cases the size of the audience might be adjusted, but presenting in front of an audience is essential.

How will we be graded? Everything you do in class will contribute to your final grade for a particular project. For everything that is graded, except mid-terms and finals, you will have an opportunity to improve your grade by revising your work before that grade is awarded. However, everything you do will not receive a grade of its own. For example: You are working on an essay that compares the way two writers approach an idea. Before arriving at a final draft, there will be drafts of individual paragraphs, thesis statements, the essay as a whole. All comments I make will help you move to the next stage of your writing growth. You will turn in your final draft accompanied by all the revisions, with my comments, that you have submitted and any graphic organizers you used as either a writing tool, or a check to make sure you fully covered the assignment. I will be looking for development of ideas, supporting evidence (proof that you have read all the required texts), citing sources, improvement in writing and willingness to make revisions and correct mistakes. Attached you will see two rubrics that I will regularly use to assess your writing. Your grade for essays will be based on three things: Content, Mechanics, completeness of your packet.

Revising your writing is essential. I will highlight the first 10 grammatical / spelling mistakes. Those are not the only ones you need to fix. Do not assume that you **only** need to correct what has been highlighted. You will have multiple opportunities to “get it right;” you must have fixed all

mistakes before passing in your final draft accompanied by your rough drafts with my comments.

You will get a grade on:

- Final drafts of writing assignments, which includes complete graphic organizers, rough drafts, and final draft.
- Vocabulary assessments.
- Each section of a multi-genre project. For example one that includes essay, graphic, and presentation elements.
- Classroom citizenship – staying on task, not distracting others, asking good questions, arriving prepared with assignment read, writing implements, paper, etc.
- Active and productive participation in class discussions (I have a rubric for this, too).
- Participation – for any activity that is clearly practice, where you are learning or polishing a skill you will be graded for the way you work in addition to producing an effort of appropriate content.

Why is this so subjective? English is more skills based than content based at the high school level. Unlike Math and Science, and even some aspects of Social Studies, there is very little, beyond terminology that can be considered right or wrong. An understanding of the basic rules of grammar and vocabulary is necessary, but in the type of reading you will increasingly do throughout your high school and college careers, understanding and appreciation of a writer's work is dependent on being able to analyze how those rules are both followed and broken. There are plenty of rules that students are taught in the elementary and middle schools that make sure they are on the right path. But some of those are often broken by many adult writers – like not starting a sentence with a conjunction, or ending a sentence with a preposition. Students who read large numbers of books tend to do better at writing, because they hear with their mind's ear, what the language ought to sound like. A student who reads histories and biographies will write differently from one who reads science fiction. Students who love Jane Austen write differently from those who love Stephen King. Students who read a variety of genres and authors find it easier to switch their style of writing to suit their purpose. The job of English class is to expose students to as much reading and writing as they can handle – and then to stretch those reading and writing muscles until they can handle more. All this is with an eye to making them successful in their life after high school, whether that life is in college or some other career. Even students who are not going to college immediately need to be ready for the possibility of continuing their education.