

KELLY GALLAGHER



# The Teaching Life

AN  
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
IRREVERENT OPINIONS,  
OBSERVATIONS,  
AND ADVICE



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*Reading Reasons*

*Deeper Reading*

*Teaching Adolescent Writers*

*Readicide*

*Write Like This*

*In the Best Interest of Students*

*180 Days*  
with Penny Kittle

*4 Essential Studies*  
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*To Read Stuff You Have to Know Stuff*

*The Teaching Life*

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*For my teaching elders, and  
for those who will follow me*







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## INTRODUCTION

When people think of their favorite teachers, they often envision an educator brilliantly imparting wisdom to a classroom of eager students. They see Jaime Escalante, who stands and delivers remarkable math lessons. They picture Erin Gruwell turning a bunch of kids into Freedom Writers. They think of John Keating (Robin Williams) standing on his desk and encouraging his students to seize the day in *Dead Poets Society*®.

OK. Nice. But let's get real.

Teaching is more than that. Much more. So much of teaching is the “other stuff”—figuring out what to do in real time when someone farts in your class, trying to survive yet another mind-numbing faculty meeting, navigating your way through all the distractions, impediments, and BS that get in the way of what is best for your students. It is also a career filled with beautiful, wonderful moments shared with beautiful, wonderful children.

After forty years in education—thirty-five of them as a teacher—this book is my attempt to capture . . . well . . . the teaching life. The *real* teaching life. I hope you find guidance in these pages. Perhaps some validation of your practices. You may even discover something that helps improve your craft. It is also likely you will come across something you disagree with. That's OK, too. It's a messy profession with room for lots of opinions. I am one teacher, who worked in one school, who experienced teaching through one particular lens.

Unlike my previous books, which were written with English teachers in mind, this book was created for teachers of all grade levels and

all content areas. It is for beginning teachers, for veteran teachers, and for those in between. As such, most of the writing in this book is new, but those familiar with my previous books will recognize tidbits here and there. (You may also recognize places where my thinking has shifted.)

So let's get to it.



# Numbers

## 2nd- and 3rd-wave thinking

Surfers can wait a long time between sets. And after sitting in the cold water, it is quite tempting to take the very first wave when a new set rolls in. But experienced surfers know better. They know that the second wave in the set is almost always bigger than the first wave. And the third wave in the set is often bigger than the second wave. If they only surfed the first wave in every set, they would never fully develop their surfing skills.



This is a metaphor I used to encourage my students to stretch their thinking. If I asked them a question, many responded with the first thought that jumped into their heads. But the richest thinking often came in later waves. Here's an example: I gave a ninth-grade class this factoid and asked them why this might be:

**Thirty-five percent of US college students have considered dropping out in the past six months**  
(Sforza 2024).

Via quickwriting, I asked them to consider why this might be. Zoe's first thought was there was too much stress, causing students to drop out. I then had them write for another couple of minutes, asking them to move beyond their first thoughts. In Zoe's second quickwrite, she wondered if perhaps college was becoming too expensive. I then asked them to write for yet another couple of minutes, again challenging them to stretch their thinking. In her third quickwrite, Zoe landed on the idea that maybe the problem was the students were unprepared for the rigors of college.

All three of Zoe's answers were correct, but had we stopped after her initial quickwrite, she would not have moved beyond surface-level thinking. The richer thinking is often found in the 2nd and 3rd waves. Students need to know this.

## 5 percent improvement

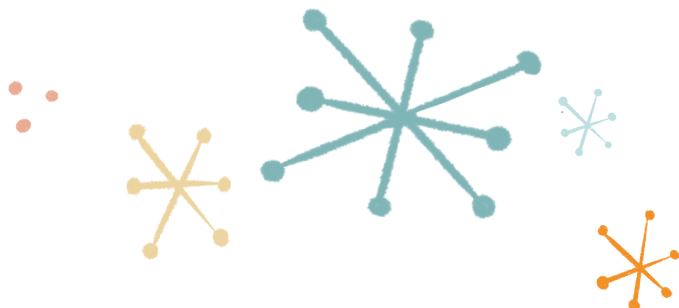
As Thomas Newkirk, noted author and educator (and editor of this book) has said, the best teachers aim for 5 percent improvement each year (pers. comm.). They pick *one* thing and remain focused on that one thing until they get better at it. (Getting better at that one thing may take more than a year.) Then they pick the next thing. Good teachers are built 5 percent at a time.

## 5-year letter

Every year on the last day of school, I had my seniors write a letter to their future selves. I asked them to recall key moments in their K–12 journeys, and I encouraged them to reflect on their future. Many students included photos or other artifacts before sealing their envelopes. I then mailed this letter to them on the fifth anniversary of their high school graduation.

To ensure that the letters got to them (given that their addresses may have changed in the interim), I had them use a friend's or family member's address as the return address. I learned this lesson the hard way: In the early days of this assignment, students used the school's address as the return address, which meant the letters came back to my school if the addressee could not be found. And this is why I was summoned to the principal's office one day. It turns out that a letter had been returned over the summer, and the principal, who was unaware of the assignment, *inexplicably* opened it. In the envelope he found a condom alongside a note that read, "Dear future me, I was never able to use this condom in high school. I forward it to you in hopes that it will now be useful." I thought that was pretty funny. My principal did not. And that is why I stopped using the school's address as the return address.

Here's a variation of this assignment: When I taught ninth grade, I had the students write letters to themselves on their first day of high school. They sealed them, and then I returned these letters to them four years later at graduation practice. They loved this.





## alphabet soup

Next time you are in a PLC or an IEP discussing CTE options for EL, LEP, or RSP students, remember to offer the PBIS and SEL support you learned in PD from the TOSA who is following the SIP plan, otherwise your ACT®, SAT®, and NAEP scores may drop below the threshold for school receiving RttT funds, thus necessitating more LRE and FERPA training.

## apologies

When you say something in class that you end up regretting—and you will—do not be afraid to apologize. Students will appreciate it when you own your mistakes. On the other hand, if you gloss over something worthy of an apology, it will fester and you will lose respect. Sometimes it will not occur to you until you get home that you should have apologized. That's OK. An apology the next day is still better than pretending it didn't happen (see **compassion fatigue**).

## argument writing

Everything's an argument. A chart depicting the rise of inflation is an argument. A photograph of a war zone is an argument. A billboard is an argument. Arguments surround us, which is one reason why argument is the one writing discourse that should be required across the curriculum. Every class. Every year.



### *blending story to make an argument*

In many schools, the argument paper is taught as a separate discourse, but good arguments use narrative to bolster their claims. If you want to argue that people should do more to help wounded veterans, then infuse the story of a wounded veteran into your argument. If you want to argue that single-use plastic should be banned, find a story of a beach overrun with pollution. If you want to argue that a law is unjust, find those who are suffering from its enforcement. The best arguments are the ones that *connect* you with real places and real human beings.



### *degrees of argument*

When teaching argument, don't begin in the deep end of the pool. Start light. My students began by writing Yelp® reviews. From there, I had them create yes-or-no charts where they picked an issue and had to write two-hundred-word arguments on both sides of the issue. Eventually, as the year progressed, I introduced the notion of recognizing and refuting counterarguments. Writing a compelling argument is hard. I did not try to teach all the things in one paper. We worked up to it.

*elements of arguments*

I taught my students that good arguments often contain the following elements:

Elements of an argument	Examples
Make a claim (direct or implied)	It is time to get rid of mandatory uniforms at this school.
Offer support/ evidence for the claim	When asked if they would support the removal of mandatory school uniforms, 92 percent of students said yes.
Say something about why this evidence is important*	This is not simply a majority of students who support this position; it is an <i>overwhelming</i> majority. Because this anti-uniform sentiment is so widespread, the time has come to take it seriously. When this many students feel this strongly about the uniform issue, the policy is overdue for reevaluation.
Recognize counterargument(s)	The administration has challenged the validity of the survey.
Refute the counterargument(s)	To eliminate bias, the survey was administered to every student in the school (as opposed, for example, to only giving it to seniors). As such, it is an accurate representation of the feelings of this student body, which means the time has come to give students choice when deciding what to wear to school.
Suggest a next step	It is difficult to enact this policy in the middle of a year, since students have already acquired their uniforms; therefore, mandatory uniforms should be eliminated at the start of next year.

\*This is the element that students most often neglect.

### *generating an argument*

Imagine you are an eighth-grade history teacher and you are teaching a three-week unit on the Civil War. You have lined up a rich “data swim” for students to read: primary source documents, photographs, film clips, charts, graphs, firsthand accounts, and textbook excerpts. At the end of the three weeks, you ask the students, “What is worth arguing?” This provides students with choice, a primary motivator. They have all read the same materials, but one student might choose to argue that Abraham Lincoln was the greatest president ever, while another might analyze why the South lost. And yet another student might zero in on a key battle, arguing this was the turning point of the war.

When teaching the argument essay, don’t start with one big question that every student must answer (“What are the causes of the Civil War?”). Instead, have them first swim through the unit *before* having them decide what arguments they want to make. As George Hillocks Jr. (2011) said, argument should arise from inquiry.

### *persuasion versus argument*

If a used-car salesperson is trying to persuade you to buy a vehicle, they might lie about its actual mileage. If a politician is courting your vote, they might make things up. If you are familiar with social media influencers, you know that some of them may promote products they don’t really use. While persuasion can remain aboveboard, one only needs to spend five minutes online being deluged with misinformation, fake videos, and propaganda techniques to see how impure persuasion may be.

Aristotle, somewhere around 350 BC, outlined three primary modes of persuasion:

*Ethos* refers to the credibility of the speaker or writer.

*Pathos* appeals to one’s emotions.

*Logos* appeals to logic and reason.

While an argument may include elements of persuasion, it is an attempt to prove the truth or validity of something via logical reasoning. If one wanted to argue that Shohei Ohtani is the best baseball player in the world, or that the current administration's border policy is ineffective, then that argument needs to be grounded in facts, data, and rational analysis. This is how argument can differ from persuasion.

### *types of argument*

Students should be writing two kinds of arguments: arguments of judgment and arguments of policy (Hillocks 2011).

Arguments of judgment often look at evaluating or making judgments about the quality, worth, or significance of something: Is the governor doing a good job? Who is the greatest living film director? What is courage?

Arguments of policy often look at rules, mandates, or procedures and argue to keep, amend, or eliminate them: Is the Supreme Court's ruling just? Is the school-wide cell phone ban a good idea? Is the president doing enough to combat climate change?

One last note on this argument section: Everything said here about argument writing can be applied to giving oral arguments as well, a skill that is undertaught.

### **article of the week (AoW)**

Years ago, when a student asked me, "Who is this Al guy?" while reading an article about al-Qaeda, I realized that I could no longer see myself as a literature teacher; I needed to become a *literacy* teacher. After all, what good was it for her to be able to identify the central theme of *The Catcher in the Rye* when she would soon graduate not being able to identify "this Al guy"?

To nudge my students out of their entertainment silos and to help them gain a broader understanding of the world, I launched the article of the week. I gave them an article every Monday and asked them to do two things: annotate it and write a one-page reflection. I collected them every Friday. The articles were not selected to entertain them; they were



selected to inform them (although the best did both). Twenty years later, I am still posting them, and they are being used in schools across the country. As I write this, here are the topics of the last ten articles:

Why we can't remember our lives as babies and toddlers.

The most unhealthy fast-food hamburgers as ranked in a study.

Why paper coffee cups are a toxic nightmare.

President Trump places tariffs on Canada, Mexico, and China.

Why Australia became the first nation to ban TikTok® for children under sixteen.

Why the price of eggs is so high.

Five years later, the things scientists still do not understand about COVID-19.

A seventeen-year-old designed a motor that may transform the electric car industry.

The Surgeon General is warning that alcohol consumption can cause cancer.

What we get wrong about time.

We should all be content-area teachers *and* literacy teachers. Why? Because students who know more read easier. They read faster. They learn more. They think deeper. And they remember more (Gallagher 2025). Isn't that more important than identifying the central theme in *The Catcher in the Rye*?

## artificial intelligence (AI)

Some thoughts about the emergence of artificial intelligence in your classroom:

**The world is about to change in ways we cannot imagine.** As I write this (in 2026), there is no way to know just how much education is going to evolve with the advent of this new technology. One thing we do know is “whatever AI you are using right now is going to be the

worst AI you will ever use” (Mollick 2024, 61). Every indication is that enormous change is coming.

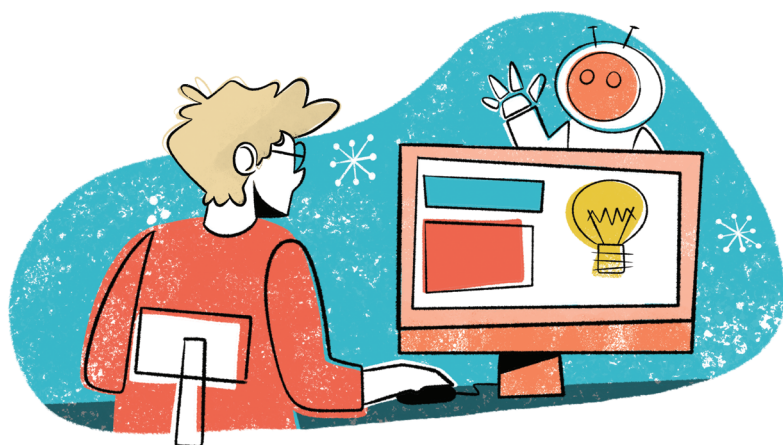
**AI can hurt—or help—your teaching.** I asked a curricular director of a large system what effect AI has had on the teachers in her district. She said that thus far, the technology has made the strongest teachers weaker and the weakest teachers stronger. The more progressive teachers were eager to embrace the technology, but once they did, they often fell into a reliance on having the AI do much of their thinking for them. This is not a new phenomenon. Since long before the arrival of AI, numerous websites have existed that will create lessons for you. This raises a concern similar to one found in *Hamlet*, where Polonius gives the following advice to his son, Laertes: “Borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry” (Shakespeare 1992, 17). Translation: Do not borrow money from others because doing so may prevent you from learning how to become self-sufficient within your own means. Likewise, an overreliance on others to create your lessons may dull the edge of your teaching skills.

The weaker teachers, on the other hand, had their teaching elevated because AI assisted their lesson planning. It gave them access to rich curricular materials they may not have found on their own and suggested creative ways to implement these materials. This ability to help teachers become more creative comes as no surprise, as AI is already proven to be more creative than most humans, outperforming all but 9.4 percent of all people on creative tasks (Mollick 2024, 101).

We need to provide training to create opportunities for all teachers to use AI as a tool, not as a solution.

**Get on board.** The sooner you welcome AI into your classroom, the more likely you and your students will be able to utilize its potential. As Ethan Mollick says in *Co-Intelligence*, “You should try inviting AI to help you with everything you do, barring legal and ethical barriers” (47). Why? Because if used with care, it has enormous potential to advance our students’ thinking (more on this later). Mollick

notes that the Industrial Revolution increased productivity by 18–22 percent. Already, in its early stages, AI has led to a 20–80 percent increase in productivity (Mollick 2024, xvii). Early adopters of this technology will have an advantage—an advantage that will widen as the technology progresses. One study found that out of 1,016 job categories found in today’s world, only 36 had no overlap with AI (Mollick 2024, 124).



**AI works better with human help.** The old maxim “Garbage in, garbage out” certainly applies to using AI. For example, when I instructed AI, “In two hundred words or less, please summarize the last three chapters of George Orwell’s *1984*,” an excellent summary was generated in less than five seconds. This prompt and the answer it inspired does not spur any thinking beyond understanding the text at a literal level. Worse, it does the thinking for the student (in this case, me). Instead, consider this prompt, which I have modified from educator Tony Frontier (2025):

**I am a high school student, and I was assigned to read the last three chapters of George Orwell’s *1984*. I’ve read the chapters, and I think I understand everything that is happening. Can you ask me four open-ended**

questions about important points in these chapters? Then, after I have replied, review my responses for clarity and accuracy, point out any misconceptions, and ask any clarifying questions that would be beneficial.

Below is AI's response to my prompt:

***Here are four open-ended questions about the last three chapters of 1984:***

- 1. How does Winston's understanding of the Party's control over truth and reality evolve by the end of the novel?***
- 2. What is the significance of Winston's interactions with Julia after their release?***
- 3. How does the Party achieve its ultimate goal with Winston, and what does this reveal about their methods of control?***
- 4. What does the final line of the novel, "He loved Big Brother," signify in the context of Winston's journey?***

***Take your time answering and let me know when you're ready for feedback!***

I then provided four answers, some of which were intentionally underdeveloped. For each of my answers, AI told me the degree of accuracy (e.g., *This is partially correct.*) and asked me a clarifying question (e.g., *Do you think Winston's transformation was inevitable, or was there a point where he might have resisted more effectively?*). This was the start of a deep, meaningful twenty-five-minute "conversation" that segued into an interesting "talk" about the relevance of the book in today's society. AI named names, giving up-to-date examples. Our conversation ended with me asking AI what George



Orwell would have thought of AI. This prompted a new thread of conversation.

I was amazed at the depth of thinking this conversation triggered—one that would be impossible for a teacher to have with each student. AI's potential for helping the teacher is unlimited. The task before us now is to teach students how to create prompts that will result in deepening their thinking.

For a more in-depth look at how AI can help your students to sharpen their thinking, start with *Co-Intelligence*, written by Ethan Mollick (2024); *Artful AI in Writing Instruction*, by Brett Vogelsinger (2025); and *AI in the Writing Workshop*, by Dennis Maglioni and Kristina Peterson (2025).

## assessment

### *formative*

My friend Barry Lane does not use the term *formative assessment*. Instead, he calls it *informative assessment*, because these assessments inform the teacher how to modify instruction. These assessments can be formal (e.g., asking a student a question) or informal (e.g., looking at a student's body language as he walks into the room). Good informative assessment benefits both the teacher and students.

### *summative*

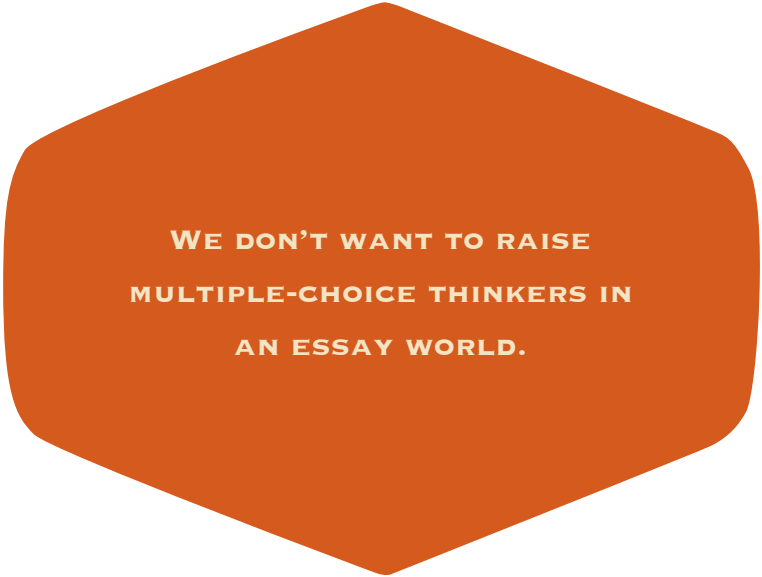
Any time I planned a unit, I started with the finish line. What did I want them to learn? And how would I know if they learned it? When that was decided, I shared this plan with them *before* the unit started. If the summative assessment was an essay, for example, I gave them the question on day one. I was not interested in creating “gotcha” assessments at the end of units. When planning your lessons, start at the finish line, and plan backward to the first day. (For more in-depth thinking on how to backward plan, start with Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's *Understanding by Design* [2005].)

## WYTIWYG

This acronym (pronounced “witty-wig”), coined by Jim Cox, a former testing guru in the Anaheim Union High School District, stands for What You Test Is What You Get. If your test requires students to think deeply, it will drive deeper teaching and learning. If the test is shallow, well . . . you get it. We don’t want to raise multiple-choice thinkers in an essay world (see **college**, *remediation rates*).

## assumicide

The death of a lesson that occurs when you wrongly assume students know more than they do (see **framing** and **prior knowledge**).



WE DON'T WANT TO RAISE  
MULTIPLE-CHOICE THINKERS IN  
AN ESSAY WORLD.



## zone of proximal development (ZPD)

This concept, developed by Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, helps teachers design lessons that present the optimal level of challenge for students. If a task is below a student's ZPD, then it is too easy and little learning occurs. If a task is within the student's ZPD, then students, with **scaffolding** provided by the teacher, can move to deeper water. If a task is beyond a student's ZPD, frustration and disengagement set in.

To help students stretch their ZPD, I often adopted a "I go, we go, you go" approach. If I wanted to teach students how to analyze a complex chart, for example, I began by analyzing one by myself in front of them, thinking aloud as I did so. Then I gave them another chart and asked them to analyze it in small-group settings. After these two rounds, each student was asked to analyze a complex chart on their own. The goal? We want to move students into productive struggle.

## Zoom®

The death of the snow day. RIP.