

books for class, by ryan c. gordon, age 9.  
aka: "something I would never do."

## The Dot

A simple story about how to start drawing.

This book needs to be presented first, in order to illustrate that writing effectively isn't magic; it isn't something that springs fully formed...but rather, it's a question of starting and experimenting.

Students will then write. And revise. And revise. And throw it away. And then dig it out of the trash and revise again.

## The Stinky Cheese Man (and Other Fairly Stupid Tales)

This is a book of fairy tales reflected in a funhouse mirror. You may recognize them, but they aren't quite right. They've been mangled up, twisted, genetically combined, and filmed through the lens of a daytime talk show. They fight for attention, break the fourth wall, and refuse to cooperate with law enforcement.

This book works well for demonstrating some things about quality writing, as a product:

- You don't have to be positive.
- You can reference other work.
- You can break the mold. Doing what's expected of you is boring.
- Most of the time, what you think is expected of you isn't correct.
- Challenge your audience. They can get fed normal by reality TV if they want.

The tactic: Read the book, discuss why things did and did not work, what felt alienating (and which parts of that actually worked out well).

Students will then write a short story: "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" and attempt to write something that breaks expectations.

## Rikki Tikki Tavi

This is a tale from Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book, illustrated by Chuck Jones of Looney Tunes fame. An uplifting tale for children about gang warfare and genocide.

Students will read and discuss this book as a precursor to reading Kipling's actual work, and later be disappointed to find out that Baloo doesn't actually sing anything or know how to pilot an airplane.

As the real Jungle Book is broken up into short stories, starting with a cartoon version of one (that, unlike the Disney movie, is faithful to the narrative), might be a nice way to take a baby step into the literature. But I doubt it.

## A Light in the Attic

Shel Silverstein's magnum opus. While not strictly a picture book, it's a collection of poems that can't be extracted from the visuals. Removing Shel's art from Shel's words would be downright criminal, but some of the poems also intertwine with the visuals, either as part of the poem itself, or to supply the punchline.

This requires an exploration of poetry recital. Read some poems aloud, compare them to the sing-song ways that children would expect to read them, then play the recordings of Shel reciting their with a Jazz slant.

Again, discuss content. What makes these appropriate for children? Are they? How did the writing work effectively to introduce more mature content to an audience that would otherwise be denied it?

## Breakfast of Champions

Kurt Vonnegut's book about...well, lots of things. Modern life, the futility of art, commercialism.

The interesting element here is, of course, Kurt's illustrations. Partially because he's contrasting his prose with stick figures, partially because one wouldn't expect this, and partially because he could only get away with the content in this form.

The tactic: This is both a followup to the discussion about The Stinky Cheese Man, in terms of bucking the system's expectations for what literature should be, and a good excuse to go right into a book for grown ups without patronizing the students down to the level of kindergartners. Students will read vigorously, take notes, discuss motivations and plot devices, and take a full exam on symbol and metaphor in the book. Four years later, while walking across the stage to accept their Ivy League diploma, they will wonder when they were going to do a fun activity based on the topic.