

Why Do I Have to Read This?

Literacy Strategies to Engage
Our Most Reluctant Students

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Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
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Chapter 1: I Hate School and I’m Not Wild About You Either	1
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These Kids Don’t Care	2
The Masks Kids Wear	2
The Mask of the Class Clown	3
The Mask of Minimal Effort	4
The Mask of Invisibility	6
When Am I Fully Engaged?	8
Circles of Engagement: Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive	9
What Comes First?	11
Back to Our Big Questions	11

Chapter 2: Wedgies, Drunken Bears, and the Stress of Shortsighted Planning	15
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Trust Them to Think	17
Our Big Questions	22
Planning Ahead to Keep from Getting Behind	27
Winging Workshop	28
Thinking About the Long and Short of It: Long-Term Planning that Guides the Day-to-Day Work	29
Curriculum Is More Than the “Stuff” We Teach	31
CYA Structures: Harnessing the Power of the Six Ts: Topic, Tasks, Targets, Text, Tend to Me, and Time	33
The Six Ts Organized by Small Bites: Topic, Tasks, Targets, Text, Tend to Me, and Time	38
Long-Term Planning Components that Remove the Masks	41

Chapter 3: The Masks of Anger and Apathy 47

The Mask of Anger 47

The Mask of Apathy 48

Teacher as Chief Connector..... 52

Connecting Kids to Content 61

Connecting Students to Each Other 67

Connections to Text 70

What Works Best to Connect Kids to Text? 71

Where Do I Find Text That Kids Will Read? 73

Connections Affect Anger and Apathy 74

What Works? Five CYA Strategies That Help Students
Take Off the Masks of Anger and Apathy 76

Chapter 4: The Mask of the Class Clown 77

Why Text Matters 79

Tending to Text Selection 82

Tending to Topics..... 87

Who Cares About the Rock Cycle? 88

Rodderick and the Rocks 89

Fifty-Two Stories High 92

What Makes a Topic Compelling? 95

I Don't Want to Get Political 96

Why Controversy Matters..... 98

The View from the Street 99

What Works? Five CYA Strategies That Help Students
Put Away Their Class Clown Mask 106

Chapter 5: The Mask of Minimal Effort	107
If Only I Could Read My Teacher’s Mind	110
Showing What Success Looks Like by Analyzing a Model.....	113
Authentic Artifacts and Mentors: Meet the Guest Teacher	115
Working Smarter, Not Harder, with Learning Targets.....	119
The Open Letter Learning Target Rubric	121
Minilessons Students Need to Keep Going	125
Real Work: The Need for Audience and Authenticity	127
What Works? Five CYA Strategies That Remove the Masks of Minimal Effort	128
Chapter 6: The Mask of Invisibility	131
Talking Isn’t the Only Way to Show Thinking	132
Making the Invisible Visible	133
What They Are and What They Aren’t	134
Design Structures That Make Thinksheets Versatile.....	138
Eight Go-To Structures for Thinksheets.....	139
Provocative Question Reflections.....	139
Double-Entry Diaries.....	143
Inner Voice Sheets	148
Synthesis Thinksheets.....	153
Exit Tickets.....	157
Vocabulary Builders	158
Silent Reading Thinksheets	161
Back to the Big Questions	163
What Works? Five CYA Structures That Help Students Remove the Masks of Invisibility	166

Chapter 7: When You Care, You Fall More 167

Teachers Wear Masks, Too 168

A Last Look at Our Big Questions..... 169

The Six Ts Are Our Tools..... 173

One Last Story 177

We Determine the Weather..... 178

Appendices..... 180

Appendix A: Learning Target Rubrics 182

Appendix B: Double-Entry Diaries..... 188

Appendix C: Inner Voice Sheets 194

Appendix D: Synthesis Sheets..... 198

Appendix E: Vocabulary Builders 203

Appendix F: Silent Reading Response Sheet..... 206

Appendix G: Virtual Background Knowledge Placemats 207

References..... 209

Index..... 212

Chapter 1

I Hate School and I'm Not Wild About You Either

Six days of double blocked classes and all I've gotten out of Ugo is dirty looks. When I try to confer with him, he puts his head on his desk. When I ask him what he needs to get started, he shrugs his shoulders. When I tell him to "get busy," he shoots me a glare.

At lunch, I pull Ugo's folder out of the period one basket to see if he has any written work that will give me a clue about him as a learner. He seems angry. He won't talk with me. To be honest, I'm a bit intimidated by this 6-foot junior, who gives me sidelong glances when I ask him what he thinks. Before going to my office, I head down to the lunchroom to get a cup of coffee. I think about Ugo as I walk toward the noise of the cafeteria.

I turn the corner and enter the student commons, and there I see him. Ugo is laughing and messing around with a bunch of his buddies. Unfortunately, I have to walk right past his group to get my coffee. If Ugo doesn't want to talk to me in class, he sure isn't going to talk to me in front of his friends. I decide to pretend that I don't see him. As I get closer, I spot him listening to a friend and then see a huge smile spread across his face. He grins from ear to ear, and I am struck by his bright, white, perfectly straight teeth. *Hmmm, I think, maybe this kid isn't so scary, after all.* Maybe I just annoy him. Maybe he just hates his English class.

I look past Ugo and his group. I pick up the pace of my walk. As I pass, Ugo stops laughing, looks my way and says, "Hey, Ms. Tovani," and then turns back to his friends.

Surprised, I stammer, "Hi Ugo." I get my coffee and as I head back to my office, I think, *I've got to see that smile again.* On Wednesday, Ugo will be my first conference. I'm going to see what's behind his mask of defiance.

We've all had students who appear angry and defiant and maybe for good reason. Ugo did his best those first six days of class to keep me away from him. But when I saw Ugo with his friends, he wasn't wearing his anger mask. I would later learn that his tough-guy bravado was a way to keep teachers from knowing how afraid he was of failing again.

2 Why Do I Have to Read This?

These Kids Don't Care

When students don't do what we want them to, it's frustrating. At workshops, I am frequently asked these questions:

- “How do I get students to think for themselves?”
- “How do I get kids to care about the learning?”
- “What do I do with kids who won't read and write?”
- “What do I do when kids don't care enough about their work to revise?”
- “What do I do if they can't read grade-level material?”
- “What do I do with students who don't care or aren't motivated to do anything?”

Teaching is complex. My whole career, I've tried to figure out answers to these questions. It seems like every week there are new layers to uncover. Lately, I've been studying how students “show up” to class each day. Depending on the day, the same kid can walk into class with a different attitude for learning. It's almost as if he is wearing a mask to help him get through the period. On the days when students struggle to engage, they seem to be wearing a mask that puts a barrier between themselves and me. Depending on the mask they are wearing, my response changes. If a student is angry, I respond very differently than if he is clowning around. How I respond can either cement the mask on the kid's face for the day, or it can remove it so the student is ready to learn. The first step is recognizing the mask.

The Masks Kids Wear

I cringe a little when I hear a teacher refer to a group of students as “my low-level learners” or say, “So-and-so has always been a C student.” Here's why: no one performs at the same level all the time. In physical education, I mostly wore the mask of confidence. Growing up with three brothers forced me to compete with males who were older and stronger than I was. When it came time to compete with my own gender and age, I had an advantage over other girls in my class. However, I struggled in algebra, and so I donned the mask of a class clown to avoid embarrassment when I didn't get answers fast enough. In language arts, I wore the mask

of minimal effort, and was known to comment on how stupid everything was. I did this to cover up my struggle to comprehend.

No one wakes up in the morning, looks in the mirror, and says, “Boy, I hope I do terrible today.” When I encounter tough students who I struggle to engage, I try to remember the different masks I wore. Recognizing students’ masks and remembering that each one serves a purpose helps me to honor and discover what they need. Sometimes the mask helps a kid save face or fit in. Other times, it helps them avoid something they struggle with or keeps the teacher from getting too close. Masks are not only a way for students to protect themselves, but also to try out who they want to become.

Sometimes those masks give us the impression that kids don’t care or that they are unreachable. In many cases, the mask is armor that protects them from the stinging bite of failure. When I think about students in this way, it gives me empathy and energizes me so I don’t give up on the ones who appear unteachable.

You’ve just met Ugo, who wore the mask of anger and apathy during the first six days of school. For stories of other students like him, check out Chapter 3.

The Mask of the Class Clown

Julian wore his class clown mask on the days he came in late. He’d make a grand entrance doing something ridiculous so that everyone knew he was there. On those days, he loved pulling kids away from their work. If he could make someone laugh, it meant they were off task too and he’d have a partner in crime. When Julian felt most vulnerable, he wore the mask of the class clown.

Everyone loves a comedian, but only for so long. The antics of the class clown get old rather quickly. When students wear this mask, they mimic the teacher and ask silly questions. They yell out comments and look around the room hoping to get a rise out of other students. Teachers can find themselves spending more time trying to get this student on task than teaching the other thirty-two kids in the room. It sometimes feels that the only way any teaching and learning can happen is if the student and his class clown mask are sent to the dean.

4 Why Do I Have to Read This?

Over the years, I've had a lot of kids who wore the mask of the class clown. I suspect that it was a way to avoid what they hated doing—reading and writing. The class clown mask provides an excellent shield that enables students to avoid what they don't like to do. They wear this mask to distract the teacher from making them do the hard work of learning. Their attempt to entertain is just a way to hide their lack of confidence and skill level for what teachers are asking them to do.

If you've ever had any kids like Julian, you will relate to the stories in Chapter 4. Along with the anecdotes are strategies to help you meet the needs of students who wear this mask, so they and everyone else in class can get down to business.

The Mask of Minimal Effort

Kids who wear the mask of minimal effort can often be heard saying things like this:

“This is boring.”

“I'm done.”

“I'm way ahead of my group so if I participate, I'll spoil it for everyone.”

“This is so easy.”

“This is good enough.”

“I did this last year.”

“I don't care; I just need the points.”

Kellen wore the mask of minimal effort. The first day of class she made sure that I knew she was already an excellent reader and writer as evidenced by the many AP classes she had taken. When she wasn't telling someone how to do something, she was rolling her eyes and acting aloof.

When I asked her why she was in my English class instead of AP Literature, she said, “I need an easy A, so I decided to take your class instead. Plus, I heard it's fun.”

I was pleased word had gotten around that my class was fun, but I was also a little irritated that she thought she already had an easy A.

During the second week of class, students turned in their first draft of a commentary comparing conditions from an excerpt of George Orwell's *1984* to

ours in the present. Kellen's first and what she thought final draft was about the integration of church and state, a piece I suspected she had written for another class. Initially, Kellen faked me out. Did I miss something in the 1984 excerpt that Kellen noticed? Was it me, or did several of her sentences seem out of place, as if they had been cut and pasted from another source? Could the draft she turned in for me be an assignment for another class? Maybe AP Government?

Kellen was the fixed mindset poster child. The daughter of a teacher, she had always been told she was an excellent student. For her, the thought of not getting the A or failing in front of her peers was frightening. At the beginning of the semester, she put on the mask of minimal effort to project competence and hide the reality that she didn't do everything perfectly the first time. When I provided feedback and time to revise, she started to feel more comfortable admitting that she needed more than one attempt to produce something of high quality. Soon she expected and accepted opportunities to revise, and the mask of minimal effort came out less often.

Mauricio, on the other hand, learned that doing the bare minimum helped him fly under the radar. He adeptly wore this mask when asked to do something he saw no purpose for. He told me on the first day of class that he was only coming to school so that he could graduate. Period. Being undocumented meant his chances of going onto college were slim. He was fluent in Spanish and English and knew that a high school diploma would enable him to get a better-paying job as a crew chief with a local roofer. He didn't want to argue, and he certainly didn't want to waste any brain power reading novels or doing a writing assignment that only his teacher would read. "Just tell me what I need to do to pass," he'd say. "I don't really care about English. I just need the credit so I can graduate."

For three weeks, Mauricio put in his seat time in return for his passing grade. When he turned in his writing, he asked, "This is good enough, right?"

"For a first draft, it is."

"I don't really redo work," he said.

"OK," I said. "But I hope you aren't embarrassed when the businessperson you send it to reads it."

"Businessperson?" he queried.

"Yeah, we're sending the final copies to local businesses so they can hear what their future workers think."

6 Why Do I Have to Read This?

“But, I don’t write very good.”

“That’s why you’re in school,” I smile. “Everyone needs more than one chance to write something well. How do you want to make your letter better?”

Mauricio picked up his learning target rubric and pointed to the last target. He read, “*I can call my readers to action*. What does this mean,” he asked?

I handed him my open letter and said, “OK, read the last paragraph, where I wrote my call to action. See what you notice. When you are finished, let me know, and I’ll help you start yours.” He took my example and headed back to his seat.

In the end, Mauricio chose to send his writing to a local construction company, explaining the importance of business owners helping undocumented workers get their green cards and work permits. When he got a response from the owner, something changed for him. I can’t help but think that having a real audience and purpose forced him to take off the mask of minimal effort. He still had a lot of writing lessons to learn. But when he heard back from the construction company I think he learned a more important lesson: his voice mattered. When Mauricio recognized a greater purpose than just playing the game of school, he wore his mask less often.

If Kellen and Mauricio sound like students you’ve had before, and you’d like to hear stories of how we worked together to remove the mask of minimal effort, Chapter 5 is where you might start.

The Mask of Invisibility

“Take the next few minutes,” I announce, “to wrap up your reading and writing. Be thoughtful about what you bring to your group. Collect any new aha moments or questions you want to share.” With about twenty minutes of class left, it’s time for students to reflect on and debrief today’s learning with their discussion groups.

I watch as students prepare to talk. Some kids shuffle through annotated articles and prioritize what they want to share first. Others have their thinking held on sticky notes, and a few have thinksheets with quotes from their readings that they want to talk about.

As I scan the room, Grace catches my eye. She dutifully organizes her folder. I wonder if she will talk in her group today to share what she has figured out. Today is the first time I’ve conferred with Grace. She is compliant, quiet, and never seems to need me. But during our conference, her thinking surprises me. Initially, she is