

Project 1: Literacy Narrative

Background: In her essay “Sponsors of Literacy,” Deborah Brandt finds that our development as readers and writers (and what we think about these activities) is tied to what she calls “literacy sponsors.” These sponsors, in Brandt’s words, are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate suppress, or withhold literacy--and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). Brandt’s theory of literacy sponsorship is useful for the way it allows us to see how individuals (e.g., parents, teachers, employers) as well as broader economic forces (e.g., the development of new technologies or changes in labor markets) shape our histories as readers and writers. You will further examine literacy sponsorship by writing your own literacy narrative--a reflective, personal essay about particular events, texts, and persons that have impacted your literacy practices.

Assignment: Drawing upon Brandt’s article, write a literacy narrative, addressed to the class, that reconstructs one moment in your literacy history when a particular sponsor influenced your development as a reader and/or writer in an important way. Besides providing a vivid, detailed account of this episode, your narrative should analyze what impact this sponsor had on your literacy development and what the sponsor’s motivations were.

Or, if you prefer, you may focus on a time when you sponsored another individual’s literacy in a significant way. If you write about yourself as a literacy sponsor, discuss what impact you had on this other individual’s literacy development and what your motivations were.

Tips for Writing:

- Your literacy narrative will be peer reviewed by your classmates, so do not share information you do not want public.
- The persuasiveness of a narrative rests on the details it provides. Try to do more than summarize your experience in your narrative; in addition, capture the concrete details (the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, dialogue, and feelings) that make up this experience.
- Avoid reducing the significance of your literacy narrative to a simple commonplace, such as “this experience taught me how important reading is” or “without literacy, I would not be the person I am today.” Remember that, according to Brandt, the story of how we acquire literacy is complex. Sponsors aren’t necessarily benevolent; they both “support” and “withhold” literacy, and they do so for particular reasons--some of which have nothing to do with helping someone read and write. Your narrative should attempt to capture the complex situation of literacy sponsorship in some way.

Length & Format: 4-5 pages, double-spaced, sources cited in MLA

Due Dates:

- Draft 1 due Monday September 17th or Wednesday September 19th
- Final draft due Friday, September 21st in OAKS

Assignment Specifications: Below are some of the criteria I will use to assess each student’s essay.

An effective essay

- Focuses on one particular moment or event in the student's literacy history that is described in vivid detail
- Analyzes the narrative it tells, explaining the significance or meaning of the event
- Demonstrates an accurate understanding of Brandt's theory of literacy sponsorship
- Documents sources using MLA in-text citations and a Works Cited
- Avoids excessive basic writing errors and stylistic problems that prevent readers from comprehending the narrative

Mrs. B and the Reading Boycott

Arms crossed in typical angry second-grader fashion, I stomped outside of Mrs. B's classroom and sunk to the floor next to my floral Children's Place saddlebag. "See if you can read better out here, my dear," she instructed me desperately, feigning a warm smile. I am almost certain I rolled my eyes at that poor woman as she nudged the door shut, leaving me planted criss-cross applesauce on the cold, speckled tile of the second-grade hallway. For what seemed like an eternity, I traced the little yellow daisies that lined the flap of my bag, trying to ignore the fact that it contained a copy of *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. I had received it, along with the subsequent eight books, in a beautiful antique set for my eighth birthday a couple of weeks prior. I publicly thumbed my nose up at these texts. Secretly, though, behind my recent front of disliking reading, I had been dying to open the eggshell blue cover of the first one. And, as I sat there flicking its yellowed, clearly loved pages, a dangerous combination of boredom and curiosity brought me to do just that.

That September day, those worn pages of my all-time favorite book came to life, as did my love for reading. More specifically, my love for reading came back to life. I grew up in a household that could not have been more conducive to growth in both literacy and love for literature. Each night, I would look forward to watching scaly dragons and valiant knights leap into battle, or extracting a moral from Max and Ruby's shenanigans as my mother read me a bedtime story. Each afternoon, I would return from school to eagerly sprawl across the couch with a story carefully selected from our large family library. However, something changed with the start of second-grade: the introduction of the Accelerated Reading (AR) program at my school. Through this program, students took a comprehension test worth a varying amount of

points after finishing a book. For the first time, I was to read not just for the sheer thrill of doing so, but also with the goal of accumulating these points and, ultimately, earning admission to an end-of-the-year ice cream party. For most kids, this was beyond exciting and fostered healthy competition. Not for me. Through the lens of a high-strung student, the AR system was frustrating in every way. Why did it weigh books by length over quality? Why did it facilitate peer pressure to read thick-backed wizard books for their point value? It took no more than a few weeks of trying to read long, bland novels, and several point comparisons with other students before I made the hard-headed decision to stop reading altogether. It was a personal pact to suppress all interest in books unless something changed.

So, when Mrs. B announced quiet reading time, I wanted to disappear into my desk and travel back to days of stress-free reading. In reality, I stubbornly buried my face in crossed arms and hoped she would not notice. Of course, she did, and I landed in the hallway as not to start a trend. After several boring minutes of conflict, I surrendered. I opened my birthday book, and my passion for words was immediately rekindled. Oh, how I had missed reading. Wilder's stories transported me from my angst to the woods of Wisconsin; they built a gray cabin, painted dark green trees, and scattered wildlife throughout the forest. I found her tales of the wild west genuinely captivating, and they glued my eyes to the pages. I was so focused that I hardly noticed when Mrs. B plopped down next to me, no longer needing to feign her warm smile.

“Is it not a wonderful story?” she questioned.

“Yeah,” I admitted. I knew I had broken my act.

She understood my persona well enough to make the connection between my reading boycott and the initiation of AR testing. Now, she had found her opportunity to gift me the

simple mantra that marks a turning point in my literacy journey and my life as a whole. “I know you are worried about AR” she sympathized, “but I want you to choose books you like without worrying about their worth in points.” If I promised to pick out books I enjoyed, she would promise to buy me ice cream at the end of the year, regardless of my point total. It was a deal - and a relief. Short and sweet, Mrs. B’s words drove me out of my phase and through the remaining eight books of the *Little House* series in a matter of weeks. That year, I read like a maniac, even delving into those thick-backed wizard books once I made the decision to explore them for myself, for my own pleasure. By the end of the year, my AR point total was nothing to scoff at. Better yet, I was treated to a double-course of ice cream.

What I learned during my second-grade year, from Mrs. B and the *Little House* series, is that the reward gained from reading for pleasure is far greater than that gained from reading to earn points, bragging rights, or any amount of ice cream. My teacher’s advocacy for recreational reading stuck with me; applying her attitude to my quest for literacy has played no small role in fostering a lifelong enthusiasm for learning. The AR program was only an introduction to the pressure of required academic material, yet my second-grade experience inspired me to supplement such texts with ones that, like the *Little House* series, revived my zeal for words. The same principle of balance has driven my efficiency as I’ve become literate in realms outside of reading and writing. Digital proficiency followed naturally when I focused on social media platforms in accordance with my personal expression, not the latest trend. Learning to manage money created little frustration when I channeled my love for planning into financial affairs. Naturally, few paths to literacy can allow enjoyment at all stages. However, my experience has

taught me that when possible, joyful learning is the most influential. It prevents resentment, instead promoting an eagerness for learning able to stimulate boundless growth.

Recalling this incident, three primary literacy sponsors stand out as responsible for encouraging my new mindset: my parents, the *Little House* series, and Mrs. B. In her article “Sponsors of Literacy,” author and English professor Deborah Brandt defines literacy sponsors as “any agents...who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy--and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). Certainly, my parents have always enabled my literacy. In this circumstance, they supported my growth as a reader by gifting me a special book series - a tool for literary growth. The *Little House* series then worked nobly to model the value of enjoyable learning. Its role eventually presented Mrs. B, most directly, with an opportunity to positively regulate my attitude towards learning. Together, these three entities helped me overcome the negative sponsor that the AR program proved for me. Without their influence and the way that September day panned out, my reading rut may have continued throughout secondary school, diminishing the opportunities that my consequential literacy growth has presented.

Now, understanding that there is no such thing as a selfless action, I realize that my human sponsors were motivated, to some extent, by incentives beyond my own success. Promoting my prosperity was in Mrs. B’s interest, whether she hoped to relieve the stress of my worrisome parents, or simply wanted to preserve her reputation as a model teacher. My parents’ choice to purchase that beautiful, antique set of eggshell blue books was backed by a certain selfish motivation; their daughter’s progress as a reader and writer would surely propel her to a certain success that validated their own as parents. Above all of these potential advantages,

though, these sponsors advocated for my literacy out of genuine love and care. They chose to nurture the learning of an impressionable child and that, undoubtedly, is priceless. Mrs. B did not have to knock down my wall around reading, nor did my parents have to supply me with the means to become a bookworm; these were the choices they made. They deserve to reap any and all benefits imagined in return for instilling in me something so important; that literacy is a privilege best respected by those who take pleasure in the process. As for the *Little House* books, I cannot help but recognize that their motivations were strikingly pure. On that September day, they transported me from the cold, speckled tile of the second-grade hallway to a gray cabin in the Wisconsin woods surrounded by dark green trees and wildlife. Their pages submitted to the merciless turning of my eight-year-old self. They lit a fire in me that has never stopped burning. And, all the while, they grinned without asking for anything in return.

Works Cited

Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1998, pp. 165–185. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/358929.