

THE 11-MINUTE ESSAY LESSON

What's the Classroom Problem?

When I was in college, I was fearful of writing analytical essays. My high school did not prepare me for them fully, and it was a daunting challenge when faced with Dr. Krienke's paper on analyzing *The Taming of the Shrew*. Often, before his lectures, Krienke would hold up an essay and declare in his heavy Shakespearean lilt, "A student has been bold enough to turn in garbage for me to peruse through."

I lacked confidence because I was clueless on how to structure the thing, let alone do the deep work of writing analytically. Questions swirled in my mind. *Was I writing well enough? How were my analysis skills? Was I providing proper evidence and explanation? Heck, was I even on the right track?*

If you're like me now as a teacher, this is still an area of writing that induces some worry. Teaching this type of critical thinking and analytical writing can be nebulous and students come at it from varying abilities and ideas.

So let's say you are needing students to write a literary analysis piece. Or you just need them to write something longer while introducing them to more complex literary writing while still being accessible and not destroying a students' confidence..

So, What's the Solution?

The 11-minute essay is here to help.

First taught in Gretchen's book *Why We Must Run With Scissors* (then called the "Insight Garden"), students follow a series of prompts in response to a truism. This can be used as a first draft of a literary analysis, an exploration of a theme, or as a way to check their understanding of a story. The best part is, this isn't a multi-day, pull-your-hair-out writing exercise. This essay literally takes 11 minutes. With a small investment of time, the results are quite surprising.

Tools/Supplies

- A common text (or two)
- Student journals
- The questions (below) displayed on the board

Basic Steps

1. Read something together. You can read one text or read two for a crossover essay.
2. Have students come up with a truism that fits with the text or develop one of your own. Note: If you are doing this for the first time with students, simplify this process by providing them with a truism.
3. Have students write the truism down as the first sentence of their essays.
4. Display the following question: **"What does this truism mean?"** and say, "Explain this truism as simply as you can. Pick up right where you left off from the period you just wrote. You have one minute to explain it to me." Set a timer for one minute and let students write.

5. When the timer goes off, announce, “Finish your thought and skip a line for a new paragraph.” Display the following question: **“How is true in the text we just read?”** and say, “Explain how this truism is true in the story. Provide at least one solid piece of evidence. You have three minutes to write.” Set a timer for three minutes.
6. When the timer goes off, announce, “Finish your thought and skip a line for a new paragraph.” Display the following question: **“How is this true in another text we’ve read this year?”** OR **“How is it true to the same text but for a different way, aspect, or character?”** and say, “Explain how this truism is true in another story or in another aspect of this story. You have three minutes to write.” Set a timer for three minutes.
7. When the timer goes off, announce, “Finish your thought and skip a line for a new paragraph.” Display the following question: **“How is this truism true in either your own life, history, or current events?”** and say, “Explain how it’s true, but this time to something that applies to real life—your own life, a historical event, or something currently happening in our world. You have three minutes to write.” Set a timer for three minutes.
8. When the timer goes off, announce, “Finish your thought and skip a line for a new paragraph.” Display the following question: **“What does this make you wonder?”** and say, “Now that you have a full page (or more) of writing, it’s time to conclude it. What is rattling around inside your brain? What are you left wondering? How could you say your truism in a different way? You have one minute to wrap this up.” Set a timer for one minute.
9. Once students are done, have them look at all that they’ve written and allow them to be surprised for a moment or two.
10. You’ve heard us say it before, but now is the time to share! Have students share their 11-minute essay with a partner and then ask for a few volunteers to share with the whole class.

Teacher Debrief

Several years ago while teaching in Houston, my district doled out a district-level assessment to see how seventh graders were performing months before the STAAR test (the Texas state assessment). They completed this assessment prior to me teaching them the 11-minute essay, and when we got the results back, they were surprised by how poorly they had done. The same culprits were at play—lack of organization, lack of depth, lack of analysis.

That same day of getting their results, I walked them through the 11-minute essay with the exact same prompt, then compared their two essays, and we reflected afterwards.

One student, Elizabeth, said, “I wrote more—and better—in 11 minutes than the hour I was given for the district assessment. Can I do this on the STAAR test?”

What we love about the 11-minute essay is that you are tricking your brain to write before your inner editor gets in your way. It has shown both students in our classes and adults in our teacher workshops that they are capable of writing more than they thought they could. They’re shocked by the easy achievement.

Elizabeth’s confidence, along with the rest of my students, was boosted, and every one of my 7th graders passed their writing portion of the STAAR test that year! That is the power of the 11-minute essay.

Want to *really* get the most bang for your buck? Try this:

1. Read a common text (or two).
2. Have students do some pre-writing work by using the Theme Chart to develop a truism and gather text evidence from the text(s).
3. Then, use the 11-minute essay as a rough draft of sorts.
4. THEN, have them revise their essay using the truism braid to really deepen and add complexity to their writing.
5. **THEN** take a step back and watch as readers weep at your students' brilliance.

Using all three of these strategies would have really been a help for me with Dr. Krienke's essays--and they'll be a huge help to your students, too.

Note: For those that are writing Extended Constructed Response, teach the 11-minute essay, but in order to meet the requirements, cut off the third body paragraph about their own lives.

Another note: While the 11 Minute Essay is a text structure, it is also a strategy that can be used with ANY of the text structures.

Video: [Stephen and Kayla Walk Through the 11-Minute Essay](#))