

Sports Stories and Critical Media Literacy

A popular one-semester elective, Sports Stories relies on student knowledge of and interest in sports to teach critical media literacy and rhetorical analysis.

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enior year. Second semester. English class. For many students, this is the last place they want to be.

But when you look around this classroom, you see students huddled together, poring over primary-source documents, looking for evidence to support their group's thesis. Others are listening to a Bob Dylan song, taking rapid notes every few minutes on the accompanying lyrics page. Still others are searching the Internet for corroborative information. The buzz of activity in this classroom would please any English teacher, but for this group of students, success in school does not come easily, and their struggles in English over the years have distanced most of them from the subject, making their engagement that much more gratifying. Fortunately, their interest in sports is a powerful motivator, leading to our development of this Sports Stories class, a course that uses sports as its centerpiece to help inspire students as they strengthen their reading and writing skills.

Within the framework of our curriculum, seniors choose two one-semester English classes, based primarily on their interests. The courses vary widely in content, including such topics as creative writing, theater arts, fantasy literature, journalism, film, college writing, and sports. The courses are leveled—Advanced Placement, Honors, College Prep, and General—and the students who enroll in Sports Stories tend to be those who struggle most with English. The Sports Stories course itself, a General-level class, helps students explore some

of the dominant themes consistently seen in the stories—real and fictional—surrounding sports: determination, the underdog, the hero, the fall of a legend. Sports provide the backdrop, themes provide the focus, and historical figures provide the human element.

As we developed the course, we felt that a simple exploration of the major themes present in sports, while interesting, would be insufficiently rigorous and that students would benefit from a more critical examination of fictional representations of historical events. We also realized that we could take further advantage of the students' interest in the subject by teaching them to read and analyze the rhetorically rich texts of sports writers such as Frank DeFord, Norman Mailer, and John Feinstein; analyze iconic sports films such as *Rocky*, *The Natural*, *Hoosiers*, and *Field of Dreams*; investigate sports controversies such as the "Black Sox" scandal of 1916; and explore documentaries and biographical accounts of sports legends. The talk is sports, but the language used and the standards addressed are typical of any English class.

This article outlines two approaches that can be used in a sports-oriented English classroom to help students develop critical-thinking skills within a context that is both familiar and engaging. These two core elements of the course—one literary and one rhetorical—provide the framework for the study of sports figures and events. Both of these units connect directly to reading, writing, listening, and speaking strands in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

The “Hurricane” Carter Controversy

The Sports Stories curriculum addresses critical media literacy primarily through an inquiry into the murder conviction of boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter who, despite evidence to the contrary, continually proclaimed his innocence. The circumstances are dramatized in the 1999 film *The Hurricane*, directed by Norman Jewison, which draws its material primarily from Carter’s account of his early life and from a book by Sam Chaiton and Terry Swinton that depicts the authors’ efforts to free Carter from prison.

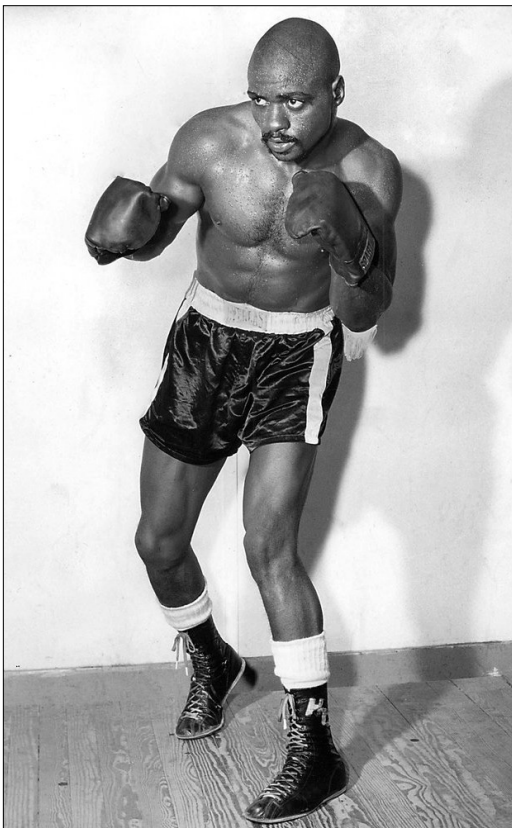
The students described at the beginning of this article engaged in a critical multimedia study to determine the historical accuracy of several representations of the primary event—a 1966 triple homicide allegedly involving Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, a mid-20th-century boxer with a promising career whose public life was spotted with violence, drugs, and multiple arrests. Carter and an accomplice were arrested and convicted (twice) for

the crime, and Carter eventually served nearly 20 years in jail before being released in 1985 when his original conviction was overturned. He was also the subject of a 1975 song by Bob Dylan that argued for his release from prison.

We began the project in class by playing Dylan’s song “Hurricane.” We distributed lyrics to the students to help them follow along and on which they could take notes as they identified significant details and major events for later use in classroom discussions. We discussed the emotions Dylan was trying to elicit as well as his avowed political agenda. (In a live recorded version of the song, Dylan identified the plight of Hurricane Carter and explained his purpose in writing and performing the song—to free Carter from prison and to encourage the audience to support Carter’s cause.) The students did not seem troubled by Dylan’s use of celebrity to promote his personal agenda; they felt Dylan had the right to express himself as he wished and that it was a case of caveat emptor on the part of the media consumer. However, the question helped lay the groundwork for a later discussion on the responsibilities of the consumer to question media sources as well as any explicit or implicit agenda(s) that might manifest.

Following this activity, we watched the film *The Hurricane* (Jewison) in class, noting major events and evidence (or lack thereof) to convict the boxer. The film is emotionally powerful and compelling, presenting a one-sided account of the homicide by inventing characters and circumstances and manipulating the “facts” of the case to favor Carter. After watching the film, students were predictably outraged at the obviously unfair incarceration of the boxer and gratified at his release. Now the fun begins.

Once the film has ended and we have compared the facts presented with those in the Dylan song, we examine nonfiction sources found in print and on the Internet, including the Chaiton and Swinton text, graphicwitness.com, and biography.com, to uncover the contrasting sides of the case. This multimedia inquiry supports the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), specifically strand RIT.11-12.7, which requires students to “integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats . . . to address a question or solve a problem.” We remind students



Rubin “Hurricane” Carter (Associated Press)

that the film is based, in part, on an account written by Carter himself and is likely to be biased in his favor.

As part of their summative assessment, we provide students with a 15-question “scorecard” based largely on a comparison of the evidence presented in the song and film versions of the event as well as their investigation of the “other side” of the story from the contrasting sources. Their task is to answer the questions using both the fictional

sources from class and nonfiction sources they must research themselves. In responding to the 15 issues, students must document their sources, provide quotations, and evaluate the evidence from both sides. As they answer each question, they must weigh the evidence from their sources, marking

each “round” on the scorecard in favor of exoneration or conviction. At the end of the “fight,” they must announce their decision and defend the “winner” in an essay, discussing the veracity of the evidence they found and explaining why they gave the round to one side or the other. Because an essay examining each of the 15 questions would be long by most standards, we ask students only to examine and discuss the five questions that were most difficult to score or that were particularly significant.

As a concluding activity, we engage students in a Socratic seminar, beginning the discussion with the question, “Is Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter guilty of the crimes for which he was convicted?” Having done so much research, the students are prepared to present their views, and because of the variety of interpretations of the evidence, there are often multiple perspectives on the extent to which Carter is guilty. Most of the discussion surrounds their evidence and their interpretation of it, and the students are often eager to share their analyses of the evidence they uncovered. We revisit the ethics behind celebrities promoting their own agendas and the responsibilities of consumers. Although the students generally reiterate their original position on the freedom of expression musicians enjoy, they are awakened to the reality of the general ignorance of the media consumer. The discussion tends to be lively, and after having done so much of the

legwork, virtually all students are invested in the activity.

At the conclusion of the seminar, most students maintained that Carter was innocent and suggested that many of the nonfiction sources—even the primary source documents they examined—were false. While this may be due to students’ inherent desire to defend the underdog or to the power of the Jewison film, it may have resulted from the order of presentation of the texts: the so-called halo effect. An interesting twist on this unit could involve completing the nonfiction research before engaging with the fiction sources.

The indeterminacy of what really happened gave students license to work hard to prove their cases, whether they agreed or disagreed with Carter’s original conviction. Students were engaged in significant tasks and numerous CCSS were addressed throughout the unit: research and synthesis (W.11-12.7-9), documenting and citing sources (RIT.11-12.1), determining an author’s point of view (RIT.11-12.6), integrating multiple viewpoints (RIT.11-12.7), speaking and listening (SL.11-12.2, 4), etc. Students learned critical media literacy skills, they began considering the responsibilities of consumers in a democratic society, and they learned that “social justice” does not mean that the punished should always go free.

The Style of Sports Writing

The best sports writers are not those who simply provide an opinion on a sporting event. They are the ones who establish a style that is unique and memorable, one that readers crave. In the context of the CCSS, with its increased emphasis on literary nonfiction and informational texts, this is especially exciting. A unit of study that asks students to analyze the different styles of sports columnists engages several CCSS, especially RI.11-12.6, which specifically calls on students to “analyze how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.” What better way to engage students in the process of understanding and analyzing writing, rhetoric, and style than through an examination of sports columnists?

The first step in getting students on the path to analyzing style is to provide them the language to identify the different stylistic moves sports

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writers frequently make. A number of different options exist for this analysis, but what we have found useful is providing a brief handout of common figures of speech that students use as a constant reference throughout the unit of study. Our handout lists 16 figures of speech divided into six categories (see Figure 1). What students are required to do—and what we model for them initially—is the process through which they can identify categories that writers tend to use most often in their writing. This identifies style and allows students to make larger conclusions later about stylistic choices in writing.

Sally Jenkins, the longtime columnist at *The Washington Post* who is perhaps most famous for co-authoring *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* with Lance Armstrong, is the model for what we expect students to do at the end of the unit: select a columnist to analyze and evaluate independently. Two of Jenkins's columns that have proved especially fruitful are "Seeing Manning in a Different Light," written after the New York Giants historic Super Bowl win over the undefeated New England Patriots in 2008, and "NFL Quarterbacks Must Take Hits, and Not Just from Opponents," written at the start of the 2009 NFL playoffs. Countless other columns exist, as Sally Jenkins still writes regularly for *The Washington Post*, but these two columns are particularly effective at revealing

three of the main stylistic devices in Jenkins's writing.

We read both articles in class one at a time. At first, we select passages, so that the initial task for students is to identify the figures of speech used in each passage and explain correctly how they are used. This is a scaffolding exercise that supports the ability of students to select and analyze quotations independently. After the second article, we go back and review both articles and the categories that appeared most often. We inevitably settle on "Repeating Sounds," as Jenkins often uses alliterative phrases; "Comparisons," as Jenkins is partial to metaphors and similes; and "Mirror Images," as Jenkins has a surprising number of antithetical statements in her columns. Some students also push for "Repeating Words and Phrases," as this also occurs frequently. Once this process is complete, students are given two additional articles to read independently and are asked to work in groups to find further examples of the three or four identified categories. Two that have worked well in the past are "Given Ballplayers' Track Records on Steroids, There's Little Reason to Believe Manny Ramirez," written after Manny Ramirez tested positive for a banned substance during the 2009 baseball season, and "Albert Haynesworth Has Failed Every Test Issued by Mike Shanahan," written during the 2010 NFL preseason.

FIGURE 1. Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are commonly used in writing to move and excite an audience. Some figures of speech are so effective that they become sound bites, quotes that are repeated over and over again. This is especially true of sports writing. Sportswriters use many different figures of speech to make their writing more memorable. What follows is a sampling of these figures of speech broken into different categories.

Repeating Words and/or Phrases Parallelism Anaphora Epistrophe	Exaggerations Hyperbole Litotes Climax
Repeating Sounds Alliteration Assonance Consonance	Inverting Phrases (Mirror Images) Antimetabole or Chiasmus Antithesis Oxymoron or Paradox
Creating Agents, Speakers, and Speeches Prosopopeia Personification	Comparisons Metaphors Similes

To provide one example of how this type of analysis typically plays out, the following is the opening paragraph of Jenkins's column "Seeing Manning in a Different Light":

Maybe it was an illusion, but did Eli Manning's face get leaner, and his back straighter overnight? On the morning after the Super Bowl, he stood at a podium to accept his most valuable player award, somehow older in a dark suit with a white handkerchief peeking from his pocket. When Manning won the game of his life over the New England Patriots, he lost something else: his baby fat.

Many things are happening in this opening paragraph. First, the image of Manning post-Super Bowl victory is compared to an illusion. Second, the phrase "face get leaner, and back straighter" provides a nice example of parallel structure. Third, the handkerchief is "peeking from his pocket," which is both personification and alliteration. Finally, the last sentence provides antithesis: he won the game, but he lost something else. Jenkins will later refer to Manning as a "puppyish player" and compare him to both an "emerging photograph" and a man "climbing out of his own freshly dug grave," to mention just a few more striking examples from this article, all of which reinforce the stylistic trends that appear in the opening paragraph. Students will eventually need to answer the "so what?" question, but for now, getting them to recognize the figurative language at work is enough.

After the examination of Jenkins, it is beneficial to review a sample from a writer who is stylistically different. For this, we use Tony Kornheiser. Some students will recognize Kornheiser from *PTI*,

Pardon the Interruption, the ESPN sports news and commentary show. Prior to working for ESPN, Kornheiser was a longtime columnist for *The Washington Post* who worked alongside Sally Jenkins. The students discover that while

Kornheiser will "Repeat Words and Phrases" and "Repeat Sounds," he also tends to use "Exaggeration" and "Create Agents and Speakers," which is something that Jenkins rarely does. In fact, Kornheiser regularly uses each figure of speech category, so an examination of his writing provides an opportunity

to coach students through the identification and selection process of stylistic moves. Students are told, "Yes, all of the figures of speech appear, but which ones appear to mark or distinguish Kornheiser's style from, say, Sally Jenkins's style?"

After we scaffold and model the process using two columnists, students are prepared to engage in the main performance task of the unit: select a sports columnist and conduct a formal analysis of his or her style. This is typically done in the form of an essay, but class presentations also work well. Students are required to select several columns from their chosen author, identify several different categories that mark the writer's style, and incorporate evidence into their essays or presentations. Major newspapers and sports magazines provide immediate online access to some tremendous writers, including Frank Deford, Mitch Albom, Rick Reilly, Michael Wilbon, Mike Lupica, and Bill Simmons, among others. And, while we focus on contemporary columnists, famous columnists from the past provide even more writers from which to choose.

It is important that the unit and summative assessment become more than just an exercise in identification. Students should at some point be asked to make larger conclusions about their author's style. They need to answer the "so what?" question. This can be done at the end of the unit, typically in the conclusion of their essays or presentations. Normally students would be asked to connect the rhetorical elements they identified to the overall meaning of the article. For those of us who teach AP courses, this is a well-known task. Can students see the forest for the trees, or do they simply identify different elements at work? Because students read multiple columns—which often have different overall meanings and purposes—they cannot take the latter approach. Instead, we ask students to conduct an audience analysis. They must identify the intended audience of their columnist. Who would be a fan of Sally Jenkins as opposed to Tony Kornheiser, for example? Why? How would you characterize the audience? What should readers expect? To answer these questions, students must consider the bigger picture and draw from their analysis of the individual stylistic elements. Is the language serious or humorous, complex or simple, sophisticated or colloquial? The answers to these questions elevate the analyses.

Students must consider the bigger picture and draw from their analysis of the individual stylistic elements.

Concluding Remarks

Our Sports Stories course has been running since the 2006–07 school year, and the emergence of the CCSS has only solidified its place in our curriculum. It is a course that does what the CCSS wants, and in many respects it is better equipped to deal with CCSS demands than our more traditional, content-driven courses. The sports course is skills-driven, thematic, multifaceted, and interdisciplinary. Students engage with history and literature, with primary and secondary sources, with fiction and nonfiction, and with text and multimedia.

We are fortunate to work with a curriculum that has electives in the senior year—a framework that allows us to broaden the traditional scope of high school English curricula—but even if creating a sports-themed course is not an option, the concepts and skills discussed here can be integrated into more conventional courses. The unit on style, for example, has its origins in composition courses that often call on students to analyze the rhetoric and style of authors. In addition, any unit of study centered on autobiography and memoir or historical fiction—and on the indefinite line between fact and fiction in such genres—can engage in the learning activities articulated in our Rubin Carter unit. The values inherent in the course are foundational. Sports provide another space for those fundamental values to flourish. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Encourage students to write their own Sports Stories using the ReadWriteThink.org Printing Press. The interactive Printing Press is designed to assist students in creating newspapers, brochures, and flyers. Teachers and students can choose from several templates to publish class newspapers, informational brochures, and flyers announcing class events. Text added to the templates can be modified using a simple WYSIWYG editor, which allows students to choose text features, such as font size and color. Documentation for the Printing Press includes instructions for using the tool. Customized versions of the tool, which include additional instructions and more focused choices, are included with some lessons. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/printing-press-30036.html>