

How to Write a Rationale

Adapted from SLATE Starter Sheet, NCTE, April 1994

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The purpose of this Starter Sheet is to help teachers and English language arts departments to develop rationales for the literature they use in their classrooms. It is organized into three areas: What is a rationale? Why develop them? How do we develop rationales?

What is a Rationale?

We frequently hear the term rationale defined as a justification for doing something. Certainly that perspective is a vital one as we explore the need for developing rationales for books or other instructional material. Both Diane Shugert (1979) and Margaret Sacco (1993) advocate writing and keeping a file of rationales in advance as a defense against potential censorship. We will frame the discussion in a broader context, describing the overriding role of rationales in classroom planning. Teachers must make decision about what they will teach and how they will then teach it, decisions that will achieve their purposes and address their students' needs. The value of developing a rationale is that it provides a framework for this planning.

A rationale is the articulation of the reasons for using a particular literary work, film, or teaching method. Minimally, a rationale should include:

- a bibliographic citation and the intended audience
- a brief summary of the work and its educational significance
- the purposes of using the work and how it will be used
- potential problems with the work and how these can be handled
- alternative works an individual student might read or view

Shugert (1979) identifies criteria for assessing rationales. Among these guidelines are that they are well thought out, avoid specialized technical jargon, are specific and thorough, and are written so that they will be readily understood by teachers who use the work. These and other components of rationales will be explored in the section on Guidelines for Writing a Rationale.

Why Develop a Rationale?

Rationale development should be part of thoughtful planning for classroom instruction. If we have not reflected on the whys of what we teach, we will be unprepared to meet the needs and challenges of our students and to respond to potential complaints, either from parents or from others in the community who seek to influence the curriculum.

While rationales are important in every aspect of teaching, we will focus here on the need for well-developed rationales for books used in the classroom—whether in whole-class instruction, small-group work, or classroom libraries. Teachers who make curricular decisions based upon mere expediency leave themselves vulnerable. Problems can be averted by carefully analyzing the audience (the students), the school, and the community and taking into full account the most effective means for meeting students' interests and educational needs.

How Do We Develop Rationales?

Teachers are frequently advised to have a written rationale for every book that they use. Realistically, this issue might be better addressed in a less absolute way by exploring four levels of rationale development. In an ideal situation, teachers would automatically write a rationale for every book that they teach, assign, including on a reading list, or keep in their classroom libraries. But mandating teachers to take on such a task when they are already overburdened is unrealistic and unreasonable. If teachers were required to write rationales for every book, many might simply stick to their literature anthologies and even avoid potentially controversial selections in those books. So while Shugert (1979, pp. 190-91) rightly cautions about using shortcuts to rationales, we do suggest options in the belief that the circumstances and conditions will determine what the teachers will do at any time.

A brief written statement of purpose for using a particular book—the why for using it and where it will fit in the curriculum. This is prepared by individual teachers based on the students, school, and community noted above and on curricular and instructional objectives and needs. At this level of rationale writing it is essential for teachers to have a written statement. Just thinking about the reason is not enough to demonstrate thoughtful planning, if a protest should arise, nor does it provide teachers with opportunities to be reflective about their decisions.

The second level involves a more detailed accounting through use of forms. Figure 1 and figure 2 show sample forms from the Connecticut Council of Teachers of English (Shugert, 1979, pp. 192-93). These samples provide two approaches—the first for an individual teacher to complete and the second for department members to fill out together. Of course, both forms can be modified to meet the needs of particular school situations.

The third level provides for the development of fully constituted rationales by individual teachers, departmental or district-wide committees, or the district English language arts coordinator or supervisor in cooperation with teachers. These rationales include many of the elements discussed above and will be explored further in the next section.

The fourth level calls for the collection of existing rationales that have been developed by other teachers or by professional organizations. By their nature these rationales are often comprehensive because they are developed as a service for schools that have challenges.

Guidelines for Writing a Rationale

The guidelines below will promote consistency as well as provide direction and support for writing rationales individually, in small collegial groups, or in departments. Sacco, in a paper prepared for the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) Intellectual Freedom Committee, and Shugert (1979) are among those who have presented systematic views of how to put together a rationale. Sacco uses a highly structured format in developing rationales with her undergraduate students, Shugert provides a more open-ended approach based on the following questions posed by Donelson (1979, p. 166):

- For what classes is this book especially appropriate?
- To what particular objectives, literary or psychological or pedagogical, does this book lend itself?
- In what ways will the book be used to meet those objectives?
- What problems of style, tone, or theme or possible grounds for censorship exist in the book?

- How does the teacher plan to meet those problems?
- Assuming that the objectives are met, how would students be different because of their reading of this book? (p. 166)

Fundamentally, Sacco, Shutgert, and Donelson concur that the role of the rationale is to provide a written statement of teachers' best professional perspective on their curriculum. The following guidelines for preparing rationales draw upon and synthesize their ideas.

The bibliographic citation. A rationale should begin with a complete bibliographic citation including author's name, complete book title, publisher, publication date, and edition.

The intended audience. The rationale should articulate the type of class and the range of grade levels at which the book will be used. The rationale should indicate whether the book is going to be used for individual study, small-group work, or whole-class study, along with an explanation of reasons for why the book is being used.

A brief summary of the work. There are a number of reasons for summarizing a book in the rationale. Writing a summary requires an in-depth look at the book. The summary provides an overview of the book for anyone who chooses to read it, and it can also reflect aspects of a work that the teacher considers most important and aspects that relate to its educational significance.

The relationship of the book to the program. Reading a book is not an isolated educational experience; as a part of the total program, the book should be consistent with the ongoing objectives of the class. Regardless of the quality of a book, if it does not make sense within the broad goals of the program, it is an inappropriate choice in that particular classroom. Any discussion of objectives should also include an examination of how a book will be used, including the teaching methodology and methods of assessment.

The impact of the book. One of the significant arguments for any work is the ways in which it will open new perspectives to its readers. In determining the reasons for using a book, teachers should also consider the potential impact it will have on students' behavior or attitudes.

Potential problems with the work. Teachers and districts are often blindsided by complaints that they never anticipated. The reflective process of developing a rationale is an opportunity for anticipating uses of language, actions, and situations in a work that might be the source of challenges. Additionally, as teachers examine potential problems, they have the opportunity to make decisions about how to address the problems, establishing a framework that supports the book's quality and strengths. For example, a teacher might anticipate an objection to the language in Walter Dean Myers's *Fallen Angels*. The issue can be addressed within the context of the realistic portrayal of young men fighting in Vietnam; the language, while inappropriate in many settings, helps build the portrait of the war's horrors. The language quite simply adds to the book's credibility.

Collection of information about the book. It is useful to collect references about the book, especially published book reviews. Professional journals and booklists from various associations (e.g., NCTE, the International Reading Association, American Library Association, journals like *ALAN Review*, *Horn Book*, and *New Advocate*, as well as non-school sources like the *New York Times Book Review* and *Time* magazine, are rich resources that can be searched via various databases for reviews of particular books. Reviews that address any controversial issues in the book are particularly helpful. These materials should be kept in a file with the rationale.

Collection of supplementary information. Teachers should collect additional materials, such as biographical information about the author, especially if it includes any critical assessment of the author's work.

Collection of books of rationales. Books of rationales such as *Rationales for Commonly Challenged/Taught Books* (Connecticut English Journal, Vol. 15, 1983), *Celebrating Censored Books!* (Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English, Ed. Nicholas J. Karolides), and *Hit List* (Intellectual Freedom committee, American Library Association, 1989) are valuable as part of the teacher's individual library or as part of the English department's professional library.

Alternative works an individual student might read. For each book they use, teachers should have a list of related titles that might serve either as an alternative or as a supplement to the book. The list of alternatives is useful when parents exercise their right to choose what their child will read. Additionally, the list may be used when students are choosing books from several options, or when they want to read related works. In other words, the listing can be useful in a number of ways, not just in response to a challenge.

References

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