

33 HOOK IDEAS FOR THE ELA CLASSROOM



1. Have students participate in “Speed Dating” to collect evidence or get advice about a thesis statement.
2. Use students as props to demonstrate a complicated Shakespearean plot.
3. Students seem fascinated by communal societies that lived and died off their shared expectations. How about a student-inquiry-based activity for students to prepare for reading *The Scarlet Letter*? Have students explore early American Puritanism based purely off questions they themselves create. What were some ways community members’ lives overlapped through daily interaction? What jobs did they have? What rules did they follow? How did they worship and serve God? What happened when people didn’t follow the rules they created? What types of punishment were practiced? Were some behaviors more extolled or ridiculed than others?
4. Invite a mortician to come talk to your students about how long Miss Emily from “A Rose for Emily” most likely had been sleeping in the bed with a corpse. To go a step further and connect it to science, have them research the body decomposition process and write, in vivid detail, a “previously deleted scene” that William Faulkner left out.
5. Think of some metaphorical river (i.e., a ditch by a less-traveled road on campus, a hallway, or lanes on a track) that you can pre-arrange some obstacles to recreate the scene of the visual text or ekphrastic poem, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Take the students there and let them all be the many people represented as struggling in the boats around Washington. Who will be Washington? You can let them decide, but there’s good in it not being you. You may even choose to have one of the students be Emmanuel Leutze, the original artist of the painting. This person arrange the scene to try to convey all the subtle messages seen through the imagery of the text.
6. Allow students to practice empathy by interviewing someone in a different generation, preferably one from the same generation as a character from a

novel or short story you are reading so that you can also help them make a connection to the characters.

7. Have students create an argument that also shows off their skills in drawing, music, photography, graphic design, cooking, etc.
8. When teaching *The Great Gatsby*, teach them the Charleston or the Fox Trot...or, better yet, tell them if they learn it on their own, you'll let them teach you.
9. You want your students to create their own Utopia before reading dystopian fiction? Have them create it graphically in 3D with Tinkercad (it's free). If you have a 3D printer, print out the best ones to make it a competition.
10. Let students read the final act of *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* before any other. Allow them to take in the scene of two main characters killing themselves. Tell them they both had been involved in the horrendous combined attack on Rome's newly crowned king, Julius Caesar, yet Caesar's friend Antony says one, Brutus, was the "noblest Roman of them all." Have them come up with their own story of what Caesar had done, how these men were involved, and how one involved in the assassination could be so extolled. Allow students to think as far outside the box as they'd like as long as their story lines fit the known information.
11. The Wandering Witches. Create an activity in which the words of the witches throughout *The Tragedy of Macbeth* direct students to different places in the classroom or school. Place clues from the text (i.e., excerpts, dialogue) at each place represented (e.g., the heath, different rooms of the castle, England, etc.) to get students thinking about one of the greatest questions in analyzing the play: To what extent does fate or choice control our lives (as seen through the character of Macbeth).
12. Want real-world application? Have students create a social media campaign to support a cause they care about or to promote their school...and actually post it. You can even have them continue the campaign all year and work on ways to reach and grow their audience.
13. Have students create a short version of a TV show that they might find on Mildred's wall TVs in *Fahrenheit 451* based on what they know about that society. Then have them write a sales pitch to convince the television executives to air it. The skill focus is on considering your audience and purpose as well as collaboration. Note: Make sure you think through the logistics.
14. Teaching poetry? How about turning your classroom into a beatnik cafe? Have the students help design it by doing some research. They can even add food and drink to a menu if you'd like.
15. 1-2-3-4 I declare Twitter War! Declare war between teams of students to see which team can tweet the most about the novel you are reading or post more tweets with a certain type of phrase in it.
16. When students walk into your classroom on the day you are introducing *The Scarlet Letter*, have the word "adultery" projected on the screen. Don't talk

about it. Just have it there while you talk about the author and give them some background. Then ask them about it.

17. Have students play Reverse Charades. Divide them into teams and have everyone on the team except for one person act out the word(s) on the card while one person guesses. This will be a lot quieter and will keep one person from having to act it out alone and being terrified of looking ridiculous. Create the words ahead of time so that you can fit them to match a novel you are reading or so that you can use them to introduce a novel by asking the students if they saw a recurring theme in the words after they play.
18. If your administrator approves, take the students outside and burn a book in front of them. Then talk about censorship and the power of words while the flames die down. You could use this to introduce *Fahrenheit 451* or *The Book Thief*.
19. Administrator won't allow you to burn a book? That's totally understandable. Bring a burned book in a mystery bag and slowly unveil what you have in the bag. Then continue with your introduction of the novel.
20. March Madness time? Let students play along by drawing their own bracket on a huge piece of butcher paper and competing against each other in diagramming duels.
21. Teaching *Flowers for Algernon*? Bring a mouse in a cage and let the students create a maze for it. Time the mouse and see how long it takes him to find the cheese. (Michelle will NOT be doing this. She is terrified of all rodents. But, hey, the students would remember it not only because someone brought a mouse to school but also because their teacher fainted.)
22. After reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, give students a piece of paper (pre-cut if needed) and have them write several pieces of textual evidence that show how Boo, Tom, and Atticus have added beauty to the world. Then, without telling them what they are making, direct them a step at a time to fold their paper into an origami mockingbird. Then have them discuss why Harper Lee titled her book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Here's a video to show you how to fold it: <https://origami.wonderhowto.com/how-to/origami-mockingbird-4824/>
23. Getting ready to teach the Hero's Journey? Come dressed as a hero. You can go with the more traditional Superman or Batman...or you can show up as Frodo or Harry Potter. Take it a step further and map the journey around campus. You can even station students at certain places to wreak havoc for you, the hero, along the way.
24. Recent fires in northern California have killed 42 people so far. In *Lord of the Flies* a birthmark-faced boy comes up missing after the kids are careless with building a fire. Students could research the California fires to learn what types of people (i.e., old, young, wealthy, poor, etc.) have fallen victim and link the findings about those most vulnerable to the character who was so ignored and poorly treated.

25. Teaching the Civil Rights era-based text *Warriors Don't Cry*? Bring in a guest speaker who has faced the harsh realities of mid-20th century racism in an integrated school system. Even better would be if you know someone who experienced being a student through the process of integration. Have that person tell his or her story to the students before reading the first-hand account of Melba Patillo Beals.
26. Take the students outside to draw depictions of myths or scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* in sidewalk chalk.
27. Ever read Jack London's story, "To Build a Fire"? London's style is masterful, but students can struggle to stay focused through the protagonist's bitterly cold, uneventful journey that leads to his inexorable death. What about a hook to get them to think about how they'd survive -180-degree temperature? Show students footage of how Tibetan monks survive cold temperatures through meditation and see if students can raise their body temperature by imitating their practices.
28. Create an image or method of loci [mnemonic](#) for memorizing an entire section of a text or speech. For example: an image mnemonic for the introduction to the Declaration of Independence might look something like this (in narrative form; you could also create it as a picture for them). Imagine a person named Winn, who is walking in the Course of Human of Events, a suspended bridge made of political rubber bands between a place called Another. As the middle of the bridge breaks, the bands dissolve and Winn turns to notice a gas station named Assume Among the Powers of the Earth, Inc. Winn looks across to Britain to see that they have one, too, at their end of the severed bridge. He thinks to himself, "I've heard of these before. These are separate but equal stations -- at least that's what I've heard their author, the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitled them." Anyway, something like this could get them started for what when written in memory looks like this: "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for the People to dissolve the Political Bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate but equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them..."
29. The subjects of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry and short stories are pretty memorable. As you're getting read to dig into "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Raven," "Annabel Lee," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "Fall of the House of Usher," or another Poe piece, encourage kids to explore and capture these by getting them to find places in the community or on vacation that make them think of some of Poe's imagery: a raven, bells, a haunted-palace-like place, a dungeon-like room, a pit, a pendulum, a mansion or house with different colored rooms, an eerie clock, etc. Have the students share these on a class hashtag or hype them in show-and-tell fashion at the beginning of a class period.

30. Also when reading Poe, consider having students research real-life murders and make connections between the killer and Poe's characters.
31. Use music to teach literary elements and analysis before moving on to texts in print.
32. Toward the end of class the day before a study of the Gettysburg Address, give a speech titled [Name of Your School] Address (e.g., Oxford Address). Start it out with 22 hours and 4 score minutes from now (that's close enough to the same time the next day) and proceed into lofty (but surely somewhat cheesy) rhetoric about the hallowed tiles of the classroom floor consecrated by alumni and teachers of years past whose remarkable contributions began a work in transforming lives that is yet unfinished. Your script could certainly include some embedded references to selected goals you intend for students grasp through this liberating study. And, of course, feel free to end it with your "classroom of the people, by the people, for the people" not perishing from the school.
33. Have students act out a narrative poem rather than drawing a plot diagram.

And as a special treat for all of you quote-loving ELA teachers, here are some quotes from the pirate himself, Dave Burgess:

"Lessons are easily forgotten, but experiences live forever."

"You can teach all you want, but if they're not listening to you, it doesn't matter."

"All progress is found outside of your comfort zone. If you're not willing to be uncomfortable, then you're not growing as an educator."

"If kids were told to choose five words to describe your class at the end of the year, what five words would you want them to say?"

"We don't get to choose who we have an influence over. THEY get to choose if they're going to see us as a role model in their life."

"Life is not 100% or fail, and neither is teaching."

"If you create a class that is wildy and outrageously successful and popular with kids, that's not going to make everybody on your campus happy...As a Teach-Like-a-Pirate-style teacher, you have to have the intestinal fortitude to face the possible, if not likely, criticism from peers."

"Change cannot be announced from the podium. Change has to be built from the grassroots level."

“Don’t let your energy be dissipated with negativity on your campus. Find where the positivity is, where people are willing to change, work with that group, and that’s where you’re going to grow. And you will have put all of your energy there and the others will be drawn in.”

“Carlos Santana said, ‘There is nothing more contagious on this planet than enthusiasm. The songs become incidental. What people receive is your joy.’ I apply this to teaching. Lessons become incidental. What students receive is our joy.”

“Questions are the key to creativity.”

Check out Episode 8: **Pirate Pedagogy of the Across the Hall** podcast for a full interview with Dave Burgess, author of *Teach Like a Pirate*, and the inspiration for these hooks. You can find Across the Hall at www.acrossthehallpodcast.com and on iTunes and Google Play. Learn more about Dave by following him on Twitter @burgessdave or by checking out his website, www.daveburgess.com.