The Tell-Tale Heart and the Unreliable Narrator

⭐ TASK ⭐ LADDER

by Susan Weston

Students will read Poe's famous short story closely, carefully, and multiple times, savoring the story and analyzing how Poe invites readers both to believe and not believe the narrator's account of the key events. The reading process engages students with a sequence of questions that can only be answered by relying directly on the text, organized to allow all students to be actively involved in the pursuit of answers. The teaching task, similarly, relies heavily on text-evidence and how that evidence builds to a vivid picture of the central character, while also requiring students to build a sustained explanation of how Poe makes that happen. The product is a full multi-paragraph essay developed by outlining, revising, rechecking evidence, giving and responding to feedback, and paying particular attention to selected surface features that will matter to the clarity and credibility of the student's work.

GRADES	DISCIPLINE	COURSE	PACING
8	📖 **ELA**	**Any**	🕐 **N/A**

Section 1: What Task?

Teaching Task

Task Template 21 - Informational or Explanatory

How does Edgar Allan Poe create a narrator you cannot trust? After reading "The Tell Tale Heart", write an essay in which you analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in the story reveal aspects of the narrator's character , providing examples to clarify your analysis.

Standards

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

CCR.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

CCR.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCR.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCR.R.4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

CCR.R.6

Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCR.R.10

Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

CCR.W.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCR.W.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCR.W.5

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

CCR.W.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCR.W.10

Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Texts

📄 **Tell Tale Heart (Formatted for Module Use)**

Student Work Rubric - Informational or Explanatory Task - Grades 6-8

	Emerging	Approaches Expectations	Meets Expectations	Advanced
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**
Controlling Idea	Presents an unclear or unfocused controlling idea.	Presents a **general** controlling idea that **addresses the prompt**, with an **uneven focus**.	**Presents and maintains a clear** controlling idea that addresses **all aspects** of the prompt.	Presents and maintains a clear and **specific** controlling idea that addresses all aspects of the prompt and **takes into account the complexity of the topic**.
Selection & Citation of Evidence	Includes minimal details from sources. Sources are used without citation.	Includes details, examples, and/or quotations from sources that are relevant to the controlling idea. Inconsistently cites sources.	Includes details, examples, and/or quotations from sources that are relevant to the controlling **and supporting ideas**. **Consistently** cites sources with **minor formatting errors**.	Includes **well-chosen** details, examples, and/or quotations from sources that **support** the controlling and supporting ideas. Consistently cites sources using appropriate format.
Development / Explanation of Sources	Explanation of ideas and source material is irrelevant, incomplete, or inaccurate.	Explanation of ideas and source material is **minimal** or **contains minor errors**.	**Accurately** explains ideas and source material and **how they support the controlling idea**.	**Thoroughly** and accurately explains ideas and source material, **using reasoning** to support **and develop** the controlling idea.
Organization	Lacks an evident structure. Makes unclear connections among ideas, concepts, and information.	**Groups ideas and uses some transitions** to connect ideas, with **some lapses in coherence or organization**.	**Groups and sequences** ideas to **develop the controlling idea**. Uses transitions **to clarify the relationships among ideas, concepts, and information**.	Groups and sequences ideas **logically** to develop the controlling idea **and create cohesion**. Uses **varied** transitions to clarify the relationships among ideas, concepts, and information.
Conventions	Major errors in standard English conventions interfere with the clarity of the writing. Language or tone is inappropriate.	**Errors** in standard English conventions sometimes interfere with the clarity of the writing. Uses language and tone that are **sometimes inappropriate** to the audience and purpose.	**Consistently applies** standard English conventions; **minor errors**, while noticeable, **do not interfere** with the clarity of the writing. Uses language and tone **appropriate to the audience and purpose**.	Consistently applies standard English conventions, **with few errors**. Demonstrates **varied syntax** and **precise word choice**. **Consistently** uses language and tone appropriate to the audience and purpose.
Content Understanding (Generic)	Attempts to include disciplinary content in explanation or argument but understanding of content is weak; content is irrelevant, inappropriate, or inaccurate.	Briefly notes disciplinary content relevant to the prompt; shows basic or uneven understanding of content; minor errors in explanation.	Accurately presents disciplinary content relevant to the prompt with sufficient explanations that demonstrate understanding.	Integrates relevant and accurate disciplinary content with thorough explanations that demonstrate in-depth understanding.

Background for Students

We are going to dive right into this story and then work together to figure out how the author makes it work. I think you're going to enjoy this one!

Extension

Not provided

Section 2: What Skills?

Reading Process

GENRE IDENTIFICATION: Ability to identify the genre of a story from the opening paragraphs, considering what the text says explicitly as well as inferences that may be drawn from the text

PLOT SUMMARY: Ability to provide an objective summary of plot.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT: Ability to analyze character development and its role in setting theme.

SETTING DEVELOPMENT : Ability to analyze setting and its role in developing theme.

IDEA DEVELOPMENT: Ability to analyze how a central idea develops over the course of a text.

Transition to Writing

TASK ANALYSIS: Ability to analyze a task's explicit demands

BRIDGING CONVERSATION > PREPARING FOR WRITING : Ability to begin linking reading results to writing task.

Writing Process

ORGANIZATION OF EVIDENCE: Ability to organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories and frame an outline.

TOPIC DEVELOPMENT: Ability to develop a topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, concrete details, and quotations.

TOPIC INTRODUCTION : Ability to introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow.

TOPIC CONCLUSION: Ability to provide a concluding statement that follows from and supports the explanation presented.

READING TO STRENGTHEN USE OF EVIDENCE: Ability to strengthen one's use of evidence by further, purposeful study

REVISION TO STRENGTHEN WRITING: Ability to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.

Section 3: What Instruction?

PACING	SKILL AND DEFINITION	PRODUCT AND PROMPT	SCORING GUIDE	INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES
Reading Process				
20 mins	**GENRE IDENTIFICATION**: Ability to identify the genre of a story from the opening paragraphs, considering what the text says explicitly as well as inferences that may be drawn from the text	**QUICK WRITE** What kind of story do you expect this to be? What evidence leads you to expect that?	Provides evidence-based thinking about story type	• Share attached version of story divided into five pages. • Assign students to read first page silently and then respond. • Share out some ideas and some evidence. • Assign first reading of full text to be done as homework..
40 mins	**PLOT SUMMARY**: Ability to provide an objective summary of plot.	**SUPER-SHORT WRITE** In 15 words or less, what is the main action that happens on your page? In three words or less, how long does that action take?	Answers questions using reasonable evidence from the text.	• Read entire story out loud to the class (Note: every student will read the entire text twice in class before the work is done.) • Assign each page of the story after page 1 to several pairs of students who are not seated close together. • Give the super-short-write assignment. • Use the first page to demonstrate a sound answer. • For each page, ask one group to write its finding on the board, and the other two to propose amendments. If there is substantive disagreement, ask each group to read out a sentence that supports their reading. • Close by underlining how the story starts slow and finishes fast.
40 mins	**CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**: Ability to analyze character development and its role in setting theme.	**ORGANIZER** Complete the "Information on the Characters" organizer for your new assigned page.	• Completes organizer. • Uses reasonable evidence from the text.	• Change pages assigned to each group. • Use the first page to demonstrate completing the organizer (attached below) • When groups have completed their organizers, ask each group to share something they noticed. • Listen for students to notice: absence of names, shortage of background information, shortage of description, abundance of adverbs for narrator's actions, bragging tone of many of those adverbs. Ask further questions to draw out any items above not noticed. • Ask "How does this evidence contribute to the whole story?"
	Additional Attachments: 📄 **Information on the Characters**			
Not provided	**SETTING DEVELOPMENT** : Ability to analyze setting and its role in developing theme.	**ORGANIZER** Complete the "Sensations from the Story" organizer for your new assigned page.	• Completes organizer. • Uses reasonable evidence from the text.	• Change pages assigned to each group. • Use page one to demonstrate organizer (attached below), emphasizing that the "felt" column should be about physical sensation rather than emotions. • When groups have completed their organizers, ask each group to share something they noticed.

			• Listen for students to notice: Many sounds, real and imagined; sights limited to the people, a little furniture, darkness and light (No real animals, only two colors); few sensations, mainly of internal temperatures; some sudden contrasts of light/dark, quiet/loud, slow/fast. Ask further questions to draw out any items above not noticed. • Ask "How does this evidence contribute to the whole story?"
	Additional Attachments: 📄 **Sensations from the Story**		
40 mins	**IDEA DEVELOPMENT**: Ability to analyze how a central idea develops over the course of a text.	**NOTES** Identify: 1. What the narrator says explicitly about madness on your page. 2. What the narrator says about his actions and feelings that may be evidence about sanity or madness.	• Answers both questions. • Selects reasonable evidence from the text.	• Change pages assigned to each group. • Use page one to demonstrate answers. • For each page, ask one group to share its answer to the first question, and the others to propose additions. • Ask a different group to share its answer to the second question, and the others to propose additions. • Invite students to share ideas about how those elements affect the overall story.
Transition to Writing				
20 mins	**TASK ANALYSIS**: Ability to analyze a task's explicit demands	**BULLETS** Translate the task into a list of what you need to included in your essay.	None (but do review each student's responses to ensure she/he understands the task)	• Discuss student responses. • Clarify timetable and support plans for the task.
20 mins	**BRIDGING CONVERSATION > PREPARING FOR WRITING**: Ability to begin linking reading results to writing task.	**LIST** Make a quick list of kinds of evidence you can use from the story to respond to the task.	No scoring	• Regroup students in threes to share their lists and then construct a class-brainstormed list from shared answers. • Have the same groups think about possible paragraph topics.
Writing Process				
Not provided	**ORGANIZATION OF EVIDENCE**: Ability to organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories and frame an outline.	**ORGANIZER** Use your notes and the story to complete the Essay Organizer, showing your controlling idea, the main points that support it, and the evidence for each point	• Shows controlling idea that a reasonable response to the prompt. • Selects appropriate major points and supports each with details.	• Share Essay Organizer (attached below), emphasizing that students should decide how many major points to use based on what makes good use of the evidence. • Invite students to generate questions in pairs about how the format works, and then take and answer questions.
	Additional Attachments:		

	📄 **Essay Organizer**			
40 mins	**TOPIC DEVELOPMENT**: Ability to develop a topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, concrete details, and quotations.	**INITIAL DRAFT** Draft body paragraphs, each with a main point and several pieces of evidence.	• Provides complete draft. • Supports the opening in the later sections with evidence and citations.	• Be sure students know that the organizer's major points become the essay paragraphs. • Encourage students to re-read the teaching task prompt partway through writing, to check that they are on-track.
10 mins	**TOPIC INTRODUCTION** : Ability to introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow.	**DRAFT BEGINNING** Write an opening paragraph that states your main idea and gives a quick summary of how you will provide your supporting evidence.	• Establishes a central idea. • Provides direct answer to prompt requirements. • Identifies key points that will support the argument.	Not Provided
10 mins	**TOPIC CONCLUSION**: Ability to provide a concluding statement that follows from and supports the explanation presented.	**DRAFT ENDING** Write a closing paragraph that sums up your main evidence and leaves readers thinking you've proved your point.	• Reinforces the central idea and main organization of the essay. • Uses fresh words to provide sense of completion. • Reinforces the central idea and main organization of the essay. • Uses fresh words to provide sense of completion.	Not Provided
30 mins	**READING TO STRENGTHEN USE OF EVIDENCE**: Ability to strengthen one's use of evidence by further, purposeful study	**REVISIONS TO DRAFT** As you reread the story, look for additional evidence relevant to the story. Revise your paragraphs to make use of the most important evidence.	• Makes appropriate revisions.	• Debrief, asking for examples of added evidence. • Ask students to total up how many times they've now read the story. • Underline key point: re-reading to get deeper insight is skilled reading: if a text is important, hardly anyone will get it all in one reading or even two.
1 hr	**REVISION TO STRENGTHEN WRITING**: Ability to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience	**FEEDBACK FORM** Complete the feedback form for a partner's essay.	• Addresses essay accurately. • Provides supportive, useful suggestions.	• Assign students to provide each other with feedback on the issues shown on the form (attached below). Note: the feedback form notes that some major points may have stronger evidence than others. When appropriate, encourage transitional connections that identify those strongest points. Play that by ear, giving the hint if and when student know they have that variation between their points.

				have been addressed.			

Additional Attachments:

📄 **Essay Feedback Form**

30 mins	**REVISION TO STRENGTHEN WRITING**: Ability to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.	**STRONGER DRAFT** Refine reasoning and organization. Check that textual evidence is carefully used and accurately cited.	• Provides complete draft. • Improves earlier edition using feedback received. • Shows sound citations.	Not Provided
30 mins	**REVISION TO STRENGTHEN WRITING**: Ability to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.	**CORRECT DRAFT** Correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation and grammar. Adjust formatting as needed for clear, appealing text.	• Provides draft free from distracting surface errors. • Uses format that supports purpose	• Review paragraph indentation and spacing, use of quotation marks, and parenthetical page citation. • Have student sit side by side and read their papers out loud, listening for grammar errors and watching for spelling trouble. • Have each student produce final draft.

Instructional Resources

No resources specified

Section 4: What Results?

Student Work Samples

No resources specified

Teacher Reflection

A few notes on this design:

1. This module is begins with students simply diving into the text, for two reasons. First, the text in question will engage students quickly and is likely to tap into the familiarity many of them already have with horror stories, so the technique makes simple instructional sense here. Second, I am exploring the broader concept of "cold reading" as modeled by teachers working with Student Achievement Partners (http://www.achievethecore.org/ela-literacy-common-core/sample-lessons/close-reading-exemplars), and this text seems suited to that approach.

2. The mini-tasks in the reading process are designed so that students can only answer by drawing from the text and so that all students can be active in developing responses to each mini-task element. Classroom time is a precious, precious thing, and this approach aims to allow no free-riders and no passive-listeners during any day's discussion.

3. The writing process calls for students to organize their thought, including the main point, in their initial outline, and then write the body paragraphs before the opening and closing. That approach calls for them to work concretely with the details of their evidence, thinking through how it works, before they craft the specific wording of their beginning and end. That matches how I have done my professional writing for decades, and I am indebted to Mary Lynn Huie for proposing a student writing sequence that follows the same process.

4. The writing process also includes a specialized re-reading of the text, expecting students to see key features differently when they read for the specific purpose of refining the argument they have already partly crafted. Again, that fits my professional experience working with complex texts: some important elements of what someone else has written only become clear after I have begun building my own text from those parts.

5. Some work that could be done with Poe's wonderful text is not done here. In this reading and writing, students will focus on plot and character and narrative structure, aiming to solidify their attention to those features. Another, equally rich approach could study how Poe's imagery, repetition, sentences and sentence fragments sustain a mood of fear and urgency through the whole tale. To be frank, no text this rich can be exhausted in the time that an eighth-grade class can reasonably give to a single work this size. Good learning requires sustained focus, and this module reflects a teaching judgment about where to put the focus in this reading of Poe. May every student have the joy of coming back to this text again, whether in a formal class or in happy individual enjoyment, to see the other riches it provides.

All Attachments

📄 **Tell Tale Heart (Formatted for Module Use) : https://s.ldc.org/u/130omk67r6mgsai2lurqc6ed2**