

Study of Student Achievement

Keystone Readiness with Constructed Responses

Christopher J. Celeiro

Drexel University

STUDY OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

1. Focus

Though technically an elective course, my 4th period Black American Playwrights class is designed as more of a literature course, in which students study plays by Black playwrights and analyze them the same way they would in an English course. The course roster is comprised of 26 male students ranging in ages 14 to 17. Of the 26 students, 25 are Black/African American and 1 is Hispanic/Latino. 7 students are identified learners with individualized education plans (IEPs). Most of the class is made of 10th graders (17), while there are also two 9th graders (one of whom is repeating the 9th grade), and seven 11th graders.

In analyzing Keystone data from past years with English Department Chair (we'll call her Ms. X), it is evident that many students are close to proficiency on their Literature keystones but are suffering due to low scores on constructed response questions. Data indicates students received "0" (did not attempt to answer the question) or "1" (answered the question with a short, potentially unrelated response to the prompt). Ms. X expressed a lot of frustration regarding this information, especially as it pertained to the sophomore students who took the Keystone in spring of 2024 for the first time. During the previous school year, 10th grade students took two ELA courses: ELA and Composition. Ms. X had previously taught 10th grade Composition for several years, having developed the curriculum and showcased tremendous student growth yearly regarding Literature Keystone data. Ms. X wanted to continue teaching Composition but was asked to instead teach AP Language and 11th grade English, all with a new purchased curriculum. In such, she relinquished all the Composition materials she made to the

new(er) teacher, a gentleman who was uncertified in his content area and had previously demonstrated struggles with classroom management. Furthermore, 10th grade English was also taught by a new uncertified teacher who has been caught falling asleep in class throughout the school year. Ms. X was shocked to see that some students actually reached as close to proficiency as they did but was disappointed to know that the students clearly had the potential to pass the Keystone on their first try had they had the appropriate supports and instruction.

Because the constructed response component of our Keystone data is always the weakest, administration continuously asks how other non-English courses are supporting Keystone test-taking skills. As the Fine Arts Department Chair, I have made it my mission to support this by incorporating constructed responses into my lessons and asking the other members of my department to do the same. With Ms. X, we created a constructed response rubric, where students are scored based on their inclusion of a claim, evidence, reasoning, and conclusion, while maintaining appropriate syntax and mechanics.

My efforts were to teach high-level Keystone constructed response writing skills utilizing the texts of our coursework, rubrics, examples, and checklists of items to include in their writing. Then, if students reach high levels of proficiency on their writing, I will scale back the supports (remove the rubric in the instructions, do not provide examples/checklists, remove workshop collaboration) to see if the skills have become habitual and if students have developed the stamina to produce high quality writing without a list of steps, much like what they will be doing on the Keystone exam.

2. Pre-assessment Lessons

Lesson 1: *Topdog/Underdog* essay.

Topdog/Underdog is a Pulitzer Prize winning play by Suzan-Lori Parks. The play follows two Black brothers, ironically named Lincoln and Booth, who live in poverty in the late 1990s. Lincoln, a divorced, impotent former 3-card monte hustler now works as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator at an arcade (he's the target, the customer plays the role of John Wilkes Booth). Though the money maker, Lincoln is financially irresponsible, and his sex-addicted brother Booth owns the apartment and handles the money. The play centers on the constant shift in power between the brothers and how different factors of their lives challenge who has power. In the end, Booth kills Lincoln.

Students read *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks then had to determine which character was "Topdog." Students could choose to discuss gambling, money, sex, and brotherhood as major topics. Students had access to the text and their notes, a rubric, and were told to use specific events or quotes, as well as analyze these events/quotes to support their response. Overall, instructions were explicit, and students had been well-prepared on the topics. Students were guided to write approximately three paragraphs. (On the previous day, students split in groups for a jigsaw activity on these major topics and were required to support their stance with quotes from text and teach them to the class).

The following is the lesson plan for the day that was submitted to administration. It utilizes the Boys' Latin lesson plan template. Additionally, a copy of the prompt that students receive has been included.

	Friday - 09/13
Standards:	<p>Theatre Standard: TH:Pr4.1.I.a Examine how character relationships assist in telling the story of a drama/theatre work.</p> <p>English Standard: CC.1.3.9-10.C Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.</p>
Objective:	<p>SWBAT Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme</p> <p>IOT analyze and interpret the presentation of major themes in Suzan-Lori Parks' <i>Topdog/Underdog</i> with 85% accuracy</p>
Do Now:	5 min: Based on what we have read so far in <i>Topdog/Underdog</i> , what predictions do you have about these brothers and their relationship/the plot?
Anticipatory Set:	5 min: Students share Do Now responses.
Direct Instruction:	<p>5 min: Presentation of Expectations. Constructed response assignment.</p> <p>Students will be given a selection of the text and a constructed response prompt similarly to the keystone. They will be given a checklist with specific elements they must include that they will be graded on. This will be counted as a <i>summative assessment</i>. This is an open note assessment; however, the assignment is <u>independent</u>.</p>
Guided Practice:	15 min: Students work individually on their constructed response.
Independent Practice:	10 min: Students continue to work individually on their constructed response.
Closure:	Students submit for summative assessment grade.
Planned Misconceptions:	<p>Confusing the two characters for each other</p> <p>Distracted by lack of grammatical correctness</p> <p>Distracted by adult themes and/or language</p>
Assessment:	Students submit independent practice for summative assessment grade.
Opportunities for Differentiation:	Students are still accountable for Do Now, Exit Ticket, and participating in class discussion to receive credit.

Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

Black American Playwrights

Topdog/Underdog Essay**Directions:**

This is a **summative assessment**. It must be completed **individually, on paper**.
Electronic submissions will **not** be accepted.

Students may use...

- Paper copies of *Topdog/Underdog* in the yellow folders
- "Who is Topdog?" notes sheet

Students may not use..

- Laptops
- Phones
- Partners

Prompt:

In class, we have discussed many major themes in *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks. We have also evaluated the way the characters Lincoln and Booth have developed over the course of the play.

You will write a **short essay (3 paragraphs)** where you answer the following question:

Who is topdog? Utilize at least one of the major themes listed below to support your reasoning.

- Sex and masculinity
- Money equals power
- Brotherhood
- Poverty and gambling

You must support your thesis with **at least 3 direct quotes with page numbers from the text**.

Checklist:**Paragraph 1:**

- Introduce the play and the prompt.
- State who you think is topdog.
- Briefly summarize why you think this character is topdog.

Paragraph 2:

- Provide 2 direct quotes with page numbers from the play that support your stance on who is topdog, utilizing at least one major theme.
- Provide explanations (reasoning) as to how that quote supports your stance on who is topdog.

Paragraph 3:

- Wrap up/restate thesis

Lesson 1 Analysis:

Of the 26 students, 4 were absent on the day of assessment and were given an alternate assignment to complete. 2 students did not turn in the assignment, despite being present, resulting in a zero and the opportunity to make up the assignment during office hours (neither of those students took advantage of that opportunity. Of the remaining 20 that were present and turned in the assignment, 7 received As, 7 received Bs, 3 received Cs, and 3 received Ds. The grades were higher than expected, which is evidenced by the way the data breaks down. The lower grades were mostly received by 11th graders, who lacked structured writing curriculum during their previous school year, whereas most of the As came from 10th graders whose teacher their previous year was an educator who has been in the field for over 20 years in various classroom and leadership positions.

It became evident to me that some students needed more support with identifying specific textual evidence. Especially given that this was an argumentative essay, I was surprised at how many students were able to take a stance but failed to support it. From all the writing, most students lost points for failing to include specific textual examples with page numbers. Instead, many spoke generally about the text overall without any sort of evidence-based reasoning as to why they came to this decision.

Moving into the next lesson, I knew I wanted to incorporate more “text detective” work, wherein students would have multiple opportunities to view the text. I decided to utilize the ThinkTrix method of questioning, which categorizes question types based on the types of responses being asked. In utilizing this, students were given homework assignments to read selections from the play *School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play* by Jocelyn Bioh and answer comprehension and analysis questions. Then when

students returned to class the next day, they would work in partners to re-read the text they read for homework, this time with targeted analysis that would require them to identify a quote, page number, and explanation as to how the quote answers the question being asked. We continued this process with *Milk Like Sugar* by Kirsten Greenidge as well, which launched us into a successful Socratic Seminar in which students compared the two texts on their theme of how young Black women are pressured by society to conform. With the knowledge that students had a firm grasp on these texts and could effectively discuss and defend viewpoints with specific textual evidence, I knew I could move to the next phase before “pulling the plug” on removing the checklists.

Lesson 2: *School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play* essay.

Earlier in the semester, students read *School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play* by Jocelyn Bioh. The play takes place in Ghana in the 1980s and surrounds Paulina, the queen bee of Aburi Boarding School for Girls who boasts about her American cousins and alleged soccer star boyfriend. Among Paulina’s crew are Ama, her closest friend; Nana, a shy girl with a tendency to overeat; Gifty, a stereotypical follower; and Mercy, Gifty’s cousin who is also a stereotypical follower but even more so considering she is illiterate. The girls are preparing to audition for a recruiter for the Miss Ghana Pageant. One girl will be selected to compete in Miss Ghana and, if she wins Miss Ghana, she will compete in Miss Global Universe. Paulina seems like a shoo-in as the prettiest and most talented until a new transfer student, Ericka shows up. Ericka is the daughter of a high-profile cocoa manufacturing owner and she has been living in Ohio for most of her life. Everyone is amazed by Ericka’s light brown skin and long hair. Ericka has also signed up to audition for the pageant, posing an immediate threat to Paulina, which causes Paulina

to blackmail Nana into stealing her file and learning that Ericka was not born in Ghana and therefore would be disqualified. Paulina uses this knowledge to her advantage when Ericka is selected for the pageant, only to then suffer skin bleeding due to the bleaching cream she had been using to make herself more “beautiful.” Despite Ericka being technically ineligible, the greedy recruiter convinces everyone to keep quiet about the issue. Paulina’s band of friend go their separate ways and manage to experience personal growth without Paulina squashing them, and Ericka wins Miss Ghana, only to be completely overlooked by the white contestants at Miss Global Universe.

For a portion of their Quarter 1 benchmark, students were presented an excerpt from the play, not unlike what they might see on the Keystone exam, and were provided with a prompt to discuss how the characters of Paulina and Ericka relate to each other and synthesize how they are pressured by society as young black women despite coming from wildly different backgrounds. Students had access to the excerpt, but not the full text or their notes. Students had access to the grading rubric and a checklist of items to include. Students were told to use specific events or quotes, as well as analyze these events/quotes to support their response. Students were told they would need to write at least one full paragraph to effectively answer the prompt. Overall, instructions were explicit, and students had been well-prepared on the topics.

The following is the instructions, prompt, and excerpt from *School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play* that students were to analyze.

PART 4: Constructed Responses (30 pts)

Directions: Read the prompt provided. Then, answer the prompt to the best of your ability in complete sentences.

Your responses should be **one paragraph** that includes...

- A claim (An introductory sentence/thesis)
- Evidence (Quotes or summarizations)
- Reasoning (Explanation of the quotes)
- Conclusion statement.

Additionally, your responses must utilize appropriate vocabulary, professional writing style, and proper grammar, spelling, and mechanics. Please reference the rubric below for how your constructed response will be graded.

Component	1	2	3	4	5
CLAIM	Does not make a claim, or the claim is inaccurate. Does not answer all parts of the prompt.	Makes a claim that is accurate but not relevant to the prompt.	Makes a claim that is accurate but weak/vague/not specific in relation to the prompt. Answers some of the prompt.	Makes an accurate claim that answers the prompt.	Makes an accurate and complete claim that restates/refers to the prompt and answers all parts of the prompt.
EVIDENCE	Does not supply evidence to claim from the text.	Supplies evidence, but it is not directly related to the claim.	Supplies one short piece of evidence to support the claim.	Supplies at least one example from the text as evidence to support the claim.	Supplies 2 or more examples of evidence to support the claim.
REASONING	Does not support evidence with analysis.	Supports evidence with analysis but does not directly relate to the claim.	Supports evidence with minimal analysis to support the claim.	Supports evidence with adequate analysis to support the claim.	Consistently supports evidence with analyses to support the claim.
CONCLUSION	Does not supply a concluding statement.	Provides a concluding statement that is irrelevant or does not support the claim.	Provides a concluding statement that partially relates to the claim.	Adequately provides a concluding statement that supports the claim.	Skillfully provides a concluding statement that supports the claim.
SYNTAX & VOCABULARY	Does not use appropriate professional language.	Rarely uses professional style and tone.	Establishes professional style and tone but fails to maintain it.	Adequately establishes and maintains professional style and tone.	Consistently establishes and maintains professional style and tone.
MECHANICS	16+ spelling or grammatical errors.	10-15 spelling or grammatical errors.	6-10 spelling or grammatical errors.	3-5 spelling or grammatical errors.	0-2 spelling or grammatical errors.

Excerpt from Part Three of *School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play* by Jocelyn Bioh

(HEAD MISTRESS FRANCIS exits. PAULINA and ERICKA sit in silence for a long beat. PAULINA bursts into tears. ERICKA turns away and perhaps some tears are shed too.)

ERICKA: You crossed the line!

PAULINA: Well, I'm not sorry! Ms. Amponsah should know the truth. It is against the rules.

ERICKA: Please! This isn't about the pageant!

PAULINA: It's the truth!

ERICKA: If you don't like me, fine! But you had no right to—

PAULINA: --You stole all my friends!

ERICKA: That's how you treat your friends?

PAULINA: You came in here, acting like you've got everything—

ERICKA: --Lotion and makeup?!—

PAULINA: --Like you didn't have a care in the world!

ERICKA: Listen you don't know SHIT about my life okay?!—

PAULINA: --Oh really?—

ERICKA: --NOTHING! I wasn't rich. I didn't have friends.

PAULINA: Whatever.

ERICKA: You think those white kids wanted anything to do with me? You think there were any other black kids in Portsmouth?! I was always alone!... And my father... was here. With his cocoa factory... And his wife and children. Living this perfect life... Not even thinking about me... Ashamed of me... His white daughter.

PAULINA: Oh please.

ERICKA: And you think my life was easy? My mother is all I had-- ...And you try watching your mother die and talk to me about how easy that is... Did you ever stop to think that I might be jealous of you?! *(PAULINA sucks teeth loudly.)* That you know where you come from?... That you have a family? I'm sorry that you don't see how lucky you are.

PAULINA: Lucky? Are you serious? Lucky where?! That my mother has eight children, most of us with different fathers? Lucky that we are the poorest people in our village? Lucky to be the darkest one in my family? That even with our little bit of money, my mother gave me bleaching cream instead of food – 'cause that would "serve me better in life"?!... That's not luck Ericka, okay?! The only luck I had was getting a scholarship to Aburi. *(Small beat.)* And you... You're the daughter of one of the richest men in the country. You will always have something... Always... *(Small beat.)* ...Trust me—my mother would have gladly traded me in for you... Clearly... She was right.

ERICKA: No she wasn't.

PAULINA: No, she was... Listen, the world has already decided... You are better than me.

ERICKA: That's not true.

PAULINA: Ericka... Yes it is.

(They sit in silence. After a moment, HEADMISTRESS FRANCIS and ELOISE enter the cafeteria.)

Lesson 2 Analysis:

Of the 26 students, only 1 student did not attempt the constructed response. Furthermore, the 25 students that did attempt the constructed response all included at least 2 specific examples from the text (most of them used direct quotes) and effectively assessed how these quotes supported their claim. To say I was impressed was an understatement; I had never been so happy to *grade* in my entire life. I think that teaching those evidence-seeking skills helped improve their writing, but I also know that students felt compelled to include the evidence because it was explicitly stated in the directions.

3. Analysis

Throughout the first nine weeks of teaching Black American Playwrights, I was able to identify issues with student writing and teach skills to help improve student writing. I was flabbergasted; it felt as though I was in a dream. Students that made a concerted effort as opposed to turning in one sentence/blank papers performed very well and were able to utilize quotes/events and analyze how they supported their thesis. Students were able to maintain professional style throughout their responses, and though some students still struggle with spelling and grammar that mostly pertained to identified learners who are continuing to receive supports in those areas.

However, I knew that there were many crutches. I was curious to see if students had effectively learned to write at this caliber and would be able to do so if not provided with the same explicit instructions (seeing as they will not see these explicit instructions on the Keystone exam). In fact, I find the “rubric” provided to students on the Keystone exam to be a bit of an insult. Nevertheless, it was my mission to teach the students

effective writing skills, and to see if I had taught them how to write I needed to remove the crutch. These next few go arounds, they are simply getting the question and very few additional instructions.

4. Post-assessment Lessons

Lesson 3: *Passing Strange* essay:

One of the unique things about the course I teach is that we can occasionally study plays by watching them. This is especially useful when studying a musical, such as *Passing Strange* by Stew and Heidi Rodewald. This semiautobiographical Brechtian-style musical chapters a young black man (simply referred to as Youth) from his adolescence growing up in suburban Los Angeles before revolting against his mother, church choir, and rock band friends to move to Amsterdam in search of “the real.” When Youth realizes Amsterdam is a paradise of sex and marijuana with no angst to inspire his songwriting, he moves to West Berlin during the Berlin riots and tokenizes his blackness as a performance artist, thinking he has found “the real” and cutting out his mother entirely. Youth realizes that his perception of artistic integrity is askew when he denies a Christmas invitation from his family, only to learn all the Berlin artists visit their families for the holidays and he will be left alone. Upon his mother’s death, he returns home and must confront his selfish search for “the real” and how his environments have affected who he has grown into and his meaningful relationships.

Students watched *Passing Strange* by Stew and Heidi Rodewald. While watching, students analyzed how Youth’s life choices and coming-of-age are influenced directly by his environment (Los Angeles, Amsterdam, West Berlin). Students were required to complete this assignment at home, handwritten. Students had access to the text and video.

Students were not provided with the grading rubric or a checklist of items to include. Instructions were intentionally vague to test if students were capable to implementing high-level writing without an explicit rubric or checklist (similarly to how they will be writing for the Keystone exam). Students were not given a framework of how much to write, though the prompt implied a structure of three paragraphs/sections, one for each major location in the play. Throughout watching the film, students engaged in discussion where they identified specific evidence to support how Youth is affected by his changing environments and lessons learned along the way. Responses were recorded on an anchor chart at the front of the class and reviewed periodically. The following is the instructions and prompt.

Lesson 3 Analysis:

Unfortunately, my effort to make this a homework assignment did not prove to be the wisest decision. As is the way with these things, there are some students who simply will not do the assignment at home, and therefore I did not have enough data to support this endeavor. Of the 26 students, only 13 of them submitted the assignment, and many of them were a day or two late.

Of the students that submitted the assignment, 8 received As, 4 received Bs, and 1 received a C. The quality of writing was high, and students were able to use specific examples despite the fact they watched the film instead of reading it (a text copy of the libretto was made available to them digitally for their reference). From this pool, it would suggest that those writing skills have been taught effectively, as many students abided by them without needing a checklist or rubric provided, but the data is inaccurate due to a lack of full participation.

Lesson 4: *Fairview* essay:

The lesson was learned – students need to write in a neutral classroom while being proctored to not only receive accurate data but also to simulate the Keystone testing environment. I felt the best text to put all this knowledge together was (admittedly) my favorite text of the entire curriculum: *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury. Given how this play often elicits conversations for being shocking “out of pocket,” I felt confident that students would have a lot to say about the play.

Fairview is divided into three acts. Act One follows the Frasier family, your typical Black American family with a mother, father, and daughter in preparation to celebrate grandmother’s birthday dinner. Act Two sees the actors repeat the same exact

actions from Act One while four white on-lookers engage in a discussion about what race they would choose to be if they were not white. Act Three sees the narrative of the Frasier continue, but the white characters from Act Two have now infiltrated the story portraying black characters (sans blackface) and rewriting the narrative in favor of negative stereotypes like gambling, drug use, and teenage pregnancy. The daughter Keisha is the only one who seems to notice what is going on, and ends the play by breaking the fourth wall and inviting all white audience members onto the stage just so they can see what it feels like to be under surveillance by others.

Students read *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury. While reading, students engaged in several text analysis activities, such as close-reads, ThinkTrix, small-group discussion, and full-class Socratic Seminar. Students had been well-prepared on the topics. At the close of the unit, students were presented an excerpt from the play (Keisha's monologue once she breaks the fourth wall and invites the audience on the stage). Students were asked to analyze this moment as it relates to major themes of race, societal narrative writing, and surveillance. Students were not provided with the grading rubric or a checklist of items to include. Instructions were intentionally vague to test if students were capable to implementing high-level writing without an explicit rubric or checklist (similarly to how they will be writing for the Keystone exam). The prompt was intentionally vague, being only one or two sentences. Students were not given a framework of how much to write.

The following is the instructions and prompt. Students were given an excerpt of Keisha's final monologue address to the audience.

Lesson 4 Analysis:

The results of this final essay really ran the gamut. Of the 26 students, 3 were absent and received an alternate assignment for makeup. Of the remaining 23 students that were present on the day of assessment, 8 received As, 6 received Bs, 1 received a C, 4 received Ds, and 4 received Fs.

Of the Fs, one of them was completely blank. The other three submitted one to two sentence responses that had sufficient theses but did not write any more. These students spent most of the time with their heads down, despite consistent encouragement to focus on the assignment and continue working. On reflecting on the remaining essays, I was able to identify growth in writing among learners.

5. Analysis

Upon reviewing the writing and the data, there is some growth that can be seen. Though it is not perfect or 100% achievement, I don't believe 100% is an attainable goal. What is attainable is 100% growth, and though we are not there yet I think I have enough evidence to show that I am moving in the right direction.

Stripping away an essential tool for students certainly provides a bit of a learning curve, and while some students managed to adjust accordingly with few issues, others seem to struggle without having that structure in front of them.

6. Conclusion

This experiment was not a total failure. Moving forward, I think what I would like to do with students is ensure they are 100% familiar with the anticipated structure and

can repeat that structure back. If students know and are explicitly taught the structure of writing beyond their ability to follow the directions, they will be able to recall it during the writing process (maybe even jot it on scratch paper so they can make their own checklist; after all students are provided scratch paper on the Keystone).

The overall experience of this study was fascinating to me. I was interested in the idea of removing teacher onus rather than putting more onus on the student, which in return created a higher level of student accountability. Furthermore, it is important for educators, both new and seasoned, to recognize and synthesize the difference between teaching skills and content. This study was focused specifically on the skill of writing, and while the content was a moving variable in the analysis of these assessments, the primary function was to evaluate how students write and if they can write effectively without being given explicit directions. So much of what I have experienced over the past six-ish years at Boys' Latin is this push for clear instructions, and while that's all well and good we also must ensure that our students have developed the skills to be successful when the instructions aren't so explicit, such as in standardized testing.

It reminds me of a learner who was part of the dual enrollment program last year with Community College of Philadelphia. He was always an excellent student who followed directions to a tee, yet when he got to CCP he was failing his writing assignments. He sought out guidance from Ms. X, a teacher who outwardly and vocally supported him as a student and as a person. Ms. X reviewed the prompts from his professor and saw that there were no explicit instructions, just simply a one-sentence prompt to be answered in essay form. Ms. X knew what the problem was and broke it down into steps for him so he had something concrete to go off. Unfortunately that during

the three years he was a full-time student on our campus that he was not tested on his ability to synthesize a prompt into a constructed response independently.