through books, television, newspapers, and magazines, as well as from members of their grandparents' generation. This material raises so many issues to investigate that students should have no problem narrowing a topic. On the other hand, the issues of moral choice, civic responsibility, and human behavior raised by Holocaust study make the period a challenge for teachers who may often feel their own knowledge base is inadequate. But when students create skinny books, the teacher poses not as the expert on the topic but as an information resource and advisor. The teacher coaches students about how and where to find answers for questions, pointing out relationships and celebrating accomplishments. Making skinny books is a way to help students learn more and overcome a teacher's own sense of being overwhelmed by a subject.

I anchor my seventh-grade unit on the Holocaust to novels, poetry, and memoirs of World War II. Good literature has always posed the important questions about human nature, and good authors have never assumed that the answers are easy. It also shows readers that more knowledge helps us to ask well-framed questions of ourselves and our society.

All of my students read *Daniel's Story* (Carol Matas, Scholastic, 1993), but students can also select other books and form natural cooperative reading groups according to their selections. The historical base gives students a chronological framework and allows them to use background knowledge about the war. Students can also make associations between what they know about World War II from recent 50th anniversary commemorations, what they learn from grandparents, other relatives, and neighbors through oral history interviews, and information they find skimming newspapers and magazines. Inevitably, their reading and oral history interviews lead students to develop their own questions. When they do, they naturally assume the roles of research editors.

For example, one student who had heard about Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babbi Yar" (translated in *Twentieth Century Russian Poetry, Silver and Steel: An Anthology*, Doubleday, 1994) asked what happened at Babi Yar. Another wanted to know about Kristallnacht (Night of the Broken Glass) because he was intrigued by the sound and translation of that term. Another, having seen the movie *Schindler's List* with her family, wanted to know more about rescuers and then narrowed this large topic to Raoul Wallenberg's activities in Budapest. Each of these interests led to a different skinny book.

As students play the role of editor in selecting and laying out material, they learn about their topic, they consider the needs of their audience, and they satisfy their own purposes in answering questions important to them. When they are finished, they have a complete product—a bound book—that they can share with great pride in a whole-class symposium. Students use their skinny books to teach others about their topics because they have become the experts. Constructing a vision of the whole subject by seeing each skinny book as a piece of the puzzle, we acknowledge the limitations of what we have learned as well as celebrate our growth. We know what we know—and what we might continue exploring.

Creating skinny books brings home to students the need to be lifelong learners. Our books contain an average of 15 to 25 articles, portions of articles, and illustrations. We realize that there is more to know, even as we celebrate having created a minilibrary. We also recognize that finding, organizing, and sharing information is a hallmark of becoming an educated adult and a good citizen.

Epstein is a reading specialist and teacher of integrated language arts and reading at Lawrence Middle School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, USA.

The Witch's Hat: Something new from something old

Patricia E. Call

The words of Solomon in Ecclesiates, "There is nothing new under the sun" and Shakespeare's words, "A rose by any other name still smells as sweet" are truisms that I accept. However, I have found that giving a new twist or a new name to an accepted concept can grab students' attention and motivate them.

I teach college developmental English classes and undergraduate reading education courses, including a reading clinic practicum experience in which future elementary teachers tutor at-risk students in language arts. I first developed the following activity in my freshman developmental English classes. I have modified the Gaussian Curve (see Figure 1) into the shape of a witch's hat. The Witch's Hat, used to show the organization of a short story, novel, or play, has captured students' imaginations in both the developmental and education courses and can be used for both reading and writing activities.

As a postreading activity to help my developmental students prepare for writing, I used the Gaussian Curve to show how the story we had just read was organized. When I finished my illustrations at the chalkboard near the end of the class, I recognized that some of my students had that set stare that precedes sleep. Before the next meeting of the class, I glanced at the chalkboard and noticed that my drawing of the Gaussian Curve resembled a witch's hat. When I introduced this concept to my developmental students, their interest (and thus their comprehension and writing) was enhanced. I also began using the Witch's Hat activity with my education students as a method of teaching story structure to their future elementary students.

Figure 1
The Gaussian Curve used in textbooks and journals to depict story structure

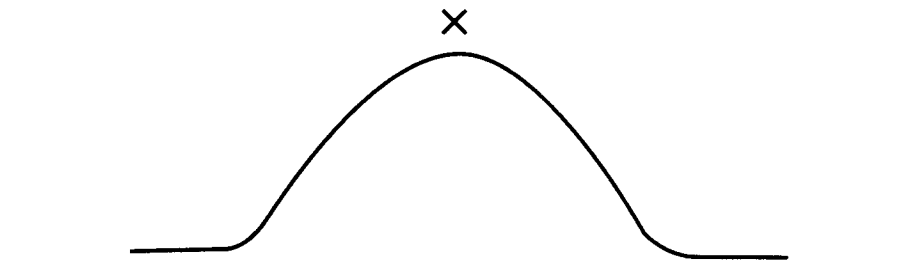


Figure 2
The Witch's Hat variation of the Gaussian Curve

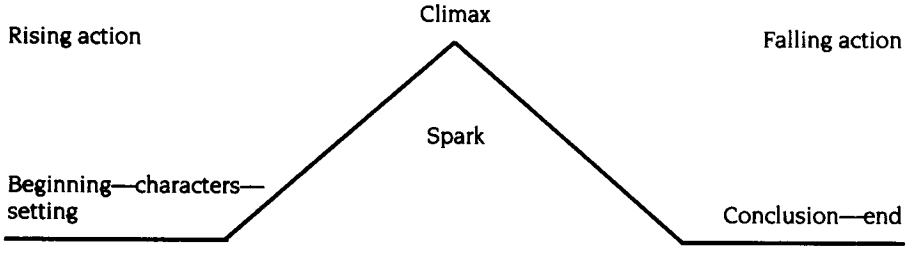
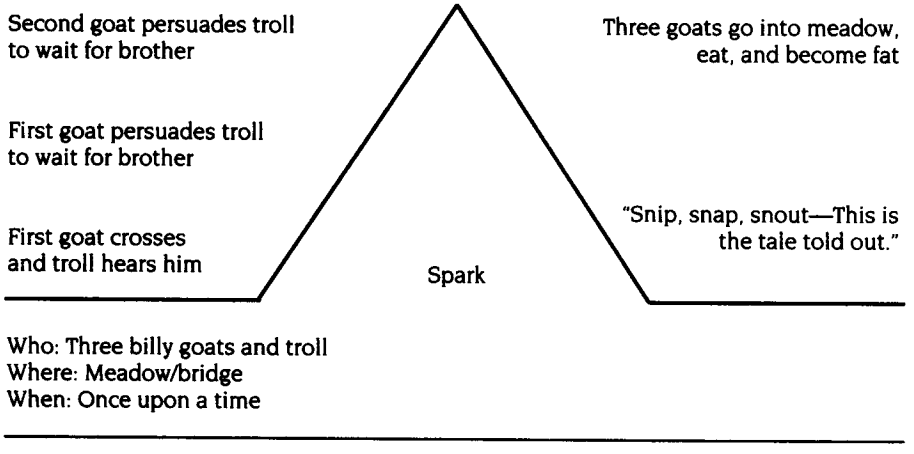


Figure 3
Witch's Hat activity for story of the Three Billy Goats Gruff



Before prospective teachers can teach a method to illustrate text structure, they must apply it in their own classes; they learn by doing. The following is my method of instruction.

Initially I discuss why it is important to teach story structure by citing research. Because comprehension is the main goal of reading, research on how recognizing story structure affects comprehension is the first focus. I point out that two types of factors that influence comprehension are internal (things that happen inside the mind) and external (things that happen outside the mind). Organization of the written message, or story structure, is an example of an external factor.

Next, I show students a transparency of the witch's hat (see Figure 2) as an example of how story structure can be taught using a simple visual aid that illustrates the organizational pattern of a narrative story.

Then I ask students for feedback on how the Witch's Hat could improve comprehension. Responses vary, but the following are frequent answers:

- ➤ As an advance organizer for developing schemata.
- ➤ By showing that writing has form and structure.
- ➤ By enhancing class participation through discussion of story elements as prereading, reading, and postreading activities.
- ➤ By tying one event to another.
- ➤ Teachers and students can use the breaking points to formulate questions.
- ➤ As a way to teach story grammar.

I then explain that one important difference between good and poor readers is the ability to differentiate the important ideas in a story from the less important ones. The Witch's Hat can help students grasp the important points of a narrative.

Reading and writing both involve constructing meaning. How might the Witch's Hat improve writing? This simple visual aid, which includes all of the elements of a story, can be used in the prewriting stage as an outline for or-

ganizing thoughts, helping students assume the responsibility for their own writing.

After I have explained why it is important to teach story structure, what the Witch's Hat is, and how it works, I have students apply the method.

The class is divided into five groups and each group is given a simple story to diagram. The scribe for each group writes the diagram on the board. A model for the story of the Three Billy Goats Gruff is shown in Figure 3.

For a group writing activity, the scribe follows the structure to organize group brainstorming in preparation for writing.

When I teach this method to students enrolled in the reading clinic course, they carry the application a step further by using it while tutoring at-risk elementary students. Tutors often make their own adaptations to the Witch's Hat, thus improving on the old and giving it a new twist.

Call teaches at West Virginia State College in Institute, West Virginia, USA.

Open to Suggestion carries suggestions for classroom teaching and other stimulating short items related to literacy development for adolescents and adults. All items are peer reviewed except for occasional items adapted from the literature.

Potential contributions should be submitted to ***JAAL*** **Editor, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA.** *Send 4 double-spaced copies and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for correspondence.*