



**Reflections based on “Anticipating Prior Knowledge”  
section of “Scoping Out the Year in Preview” chapter  
from *Teaching Writing in the Middle School* (2013)**

My name is Jazmen Moore and I teach English Literature to sophomores, and an interdisciplinary World Studies class to freshman at Oak Park and River Forest (OPRF) High School, located in Oak Park, Illinois. OPRF is a public high school located in the West suburbs of Chicago. It serves 3,400 students from a range of racial and socioeconomic class backgrounds. Although I teach at the secondary level, I found the strategies from the “Assessing Prior Knowledge” section of *Teaching Writing in the Middle School* to be extremely applicable in my classroom at the start of a new school year. I specifically chose the strategies from this section to include in my instruction because I was teaching groups of students whom I was completely unfamiliar with. By utilizing the strategies outlined for assessing prior knowledge, I was able to better familiarize myself with my students’ strengths in reading and writing and the areas where they could use additional support.

I adapted the strategies for activating prior knowledge by creating an introductory unit that allowed for me to gain initial insight into who my students were as readers, writers, and thinkers. During this unit, students took a diagnostic reading comprehension test and also produced writing samples based on given prompts. Students also completed surveys and wrote journal responses that required them to share their views on reading and writing: whether they loved, hated, tolerated it, or some feeling in between.

In addition to me gaining valuable information about my students’ prior knowledge, the goal of this unit was also to challenge my students to reflect on the experiences that had shaped them into the readers, writers, and thinkers they had become. The most meaningful part of this unit was when students wrote journal responses to the following questions and then shared them in group discussions. Questions: 1.) What is your worst memory connected to reading and/or writing? Why? 2.) What is your best memory connected to reading and/or writing? Why?

Many students shared stories of frustration about elementary school teachers who had openly criticized their writing, or who had ridiculed them in front of their classmates by telling them that popular books like “Harry Potter” would be too challenging for them to read. This was the most valuable information I learned throughout my accessing prior knowledge mini-unit because it made me consider how I could help my students repair their fraught relationships with literacy. This strategy and my adaptations of it led to successful learning outcomes in my classroom because it taught my students that self-reflection would be valued in my class, it helped to establish my classroom as a safe space where students could share their stories, and it also helped to prepare my students to write their first narrative of the year. In the future, one thing I would change about implementing the accessing prior knowledge strategies would be to incorporate more interactive learning activities that would allow for me to better assess my students multiple learning styles.

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