Teaching Harry Potter in the Composition Classroom

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Original art work by Ciarra Barnes for Harry Potter Oral Presentation
Harry Potter and reflection on social issues

- “...education should encourage students to reflect on social issues so that they become responsible citizens and leaders that uphold the values of human rights” (Cappy 125).
Special topics classes reach students through uncommon means

- Special Topics classes are those that aren’t already part of the curriculum rotation, says Kim Barnett-Johnson, the College’s vice chancellor for Academic Affairs. They typically come about from student or instructor interest.

- “They are things that we feel are going to be value-added to the students’ educational experience,” she says. “Sometimes they are areas that the instructor or program chair feels like, ‘Hey, if we can give our students this experience, that will only make them more valuable in the marketplace.’”

---- Interview from Inside Ivy Tech Community College
English Composition Course Objectives
for Ivy Tech Community College

- Upon successful completion of this course, the student will be expected to do the following:
- Understand communication theory and the roles audiences play in the writing process.
- Apply critical reading and thinking skills to writing.
- Demonstrate an awareness of language as a tool for learning and communication.
- Develop strategies for making independent, critical evaluations of student and published texts.
- Research and critically evaluate information to produce writing with APA or MLA format documentation, which consists of in-text citations and final list of all sources cited.
- Apply strategies for the composing process, such as drafting, collaborating, revising, and peer evaluating to produce written documents.
- Write well-organized essays with a firm thesis and a clear introduction, body and conclusion.
- Engage in pre-writing activities, including narrowing a topic, generating ideas, determining the audience and the relationship between audience and content, and setting an appropriate tone.
- Demonstrate an understanding of various rhetorical modes, including argumentation and analysis, and apply that understanding in various writing environments, including an essay test.
- Support a thesis statement with valid reasons and evidence.
“English Composition is designed to develop students’ abilities to think, organize, and express their ideas clearly and effectively in writing. This course incorporates reading, research, and critical thinking. Emphasis is placed on the various forms of expository writing such as process, description, narration, comparison, analysis, persuasion, and argumentation. A research paper is required. Numerous in-class writing activities are required in addition to extended essays written outside of class.”
English Composition is NOT the Harry Potter Book Club

- Yes, students are sorted into their respective Houses (Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin) on the first day of class to determine their peer groups for the Oral Presentation on Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, and Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. Students explain their reasons for their choices based on the “Sorting Hat Song,” from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone.

- Students are introduced to their major assignments on the first day of class:
  - A personal literacy narrative, which is a life event related to literacy, about how they became fans of Harry Potter and why
  - A research-based paper on how Harry Potter changed the world
  - A rhetorical analysis—where students evaluate a book’s purpose, audience, content, context, and more—of a chapter from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, the fourth book in the series
  - A research paper focused on any argument they’d like to construct, such as “What is Harry Potter’s impact on the moral development of children?”, “Is Hermione a feminist?”, “How does J.K. Rowling deal with ethnic differences between pure-bloods* and Mudbloods*?”, and “How does she address slavery through the house elves*?”
“It’s definitely not a fluff class...”

- Hannah Huffman, a nursing student, says this is her second time taking English 111—when she took it 10 years ago, she was just out of high school—and while being interested in the topic is helping her succeed, the class is by no means easy.

- “It’s definitely not a fluff class,” she says. “The thought going into it was, ‘Oh, it should be pretty easy. I’m really familiar with the books,’ but I’m being challenged in a whole new way. Right now, we’re working on our informative paper, and I’m really struggling to find the information I thought I was going to use.”

- ----- Interview from Inside Ivy Tech Community College

“Taking arms against Harry Potter, at this moment, is to emulate Hamlet taking arms against a sea of troubles. By opposing the sea, you won’t end it. The Harry Potter epiphenomenon will go on, doubtless for some time, as J.R.R. Tolkien did, and then wane.

But I will keep in mind that a host are reading it who simply will not read superior fare, such as Kenneth Grahame’s "The Wind in the Willows" or the "Alice" books of Lewis Carroll. Is it better that they read Rowling than not read at all? Will they advance from Rowling to more difficult pleasures?”

My response? Yes, students will advance to read more “superior fare.” But this is an opportunity to discuss “high brow” versus “low brow” literature.
House elves, Mudbloods, Pure-bloods, and Muggle-boms

“At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way in,” said Hermione sharply. “They got in on pure talent.”

“No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood,” he spat.

Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words. Flint had to dive in front of Malfoy to stop Fred and George jumping on him. Alicia shrieked, “How dare you!”, and Ron plunged his hand into his robes, pulled out his wand, yelling, “You’ll pay for that one, Malfoy!” and pointed it furiously under Flint’s arm at Malfoy’s face (112).
Harry Potter’s magic in addressing racism, prejudice, slavery, discrimination, etc.

- “It’s about the most insulting thing he could think of,” gasped Ron, coming back up. “Mudblood’s a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born --- you know, non-magic parents. There are some wizards --- like Malfoy’s family --- who think they’re better than everyone else because they’re what people call pure-blood... It’s a disgusting thing to call someone,” said Ron, wiping his sweaty brow with a shaking hand. “Dirty blood, see. Common blood. It’s ridiculous. Most wizards these days are half-blood anyway. If we hadn’t married Muggles we’d died out” (116).

- These passages open the door to a discussion about the Harry Potter series and J.K. Rowling’s apparent agenda to introduce issues involving racism, prejudice, slavery, discrimination, etc.
Are Rowling’s Stories Moral Narratives?

- “Overall, Rowling’s stories fulfill the reader’s need for a story with moral certainty. Bear et al. assert, ‘to act in a moral way, a person must first understand how his or her actions affect the welfare of others, judge whether such actions are right or wrong, intend to act in accord with this judgment and follow through with this intention’” (Binnendyk and Schonert-Reichl 197).

- ---- From “Harry Potter and Moral Development in Pre-adolescent Children”
Harry Potter as a tool for social change and how the series stimulates debate

- The goal is to transform students from being passive about the issues Rowling presents in her Harry Potter novels to being active in challenging or acting against discrimination of stigmatized groups.
- The Harry Potter books can inspire, instruct, and encourage students to speak up and take action about issues relating to social inequalities.
- “Harry has meaningful contact with characters belonging to stigmatized groups. He tries to understand them and appreciate their difficulties, some of which stem from intergroup discrimination, and fights for a world free of social inequalities” (Vezzalim et al. 106).
One student’s reaction to “The Greatest Magic of Harry Potter: Reducing Prejudice”

- Marissa Vaught had this response to the previous quotation:
- “Harry Potter bases his choices of friends and those he finds valuable in his life based on character and attributes which make up an individual on the inside, not physical traits, or a ‘class’ into which the individual was born into. In fact, Harry seems to be quite drawn to these individuals as he was for the first 11 years of his life as a member of the ‘out-group’. Harry befriends Ron, someone who is criticized for being poor, Hermione who is classified as a ‘Mudblood’ and ‘Muggle-born’, Hagrid, who is a half-giant, etc. Because Harry has had meaningful relationships with these stigmatized groups, he is able to serve as a positive influence to the reader in making a choice to judge a person based on who they are on the inside and not just on the outside.”
Dialogic Teaching and Harry Potter

- **What is Dialogic Teaching?**

- "Dialogic Teaching" means using talk most effectively for carrying out teaching and learning. Dialogic teaching involves ongoing talk between teacher and students, not just teacher-presentation.

- Through dialogue, teachers can elicit students' everyday, 'common sense' perspectives, engage with their developing ideas and help them overcome misunderstandings.

- When students are given opportunities to contribute to classroom dialogue in extended and varied ways, they can explore the limits of their own understanding. At the same time they practice new ways of using language as a tool for constructing knowledge.” ---- University of Cambridge
Conclusion

- The Composition Classroom does not suffer by using so-called “low-brow” literature to teach academic writing and critical thinking. The series, which had its debut on June 26, 1997, has become the most popular series in publishing history. According to Fortune magazine, “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, the first book in the series, is one of the bestselling books of all time. According to Scholastic, more than 400 million copies of Harry Potter titles have been sold worldwide, and they’ve been translated into 68 languages. ... The Harry Potter books were first adapted for the big screen in 2001 with the film Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. Every film in the series except Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban is among the 50 highest-grossing films of all time with ... Deathly Hallows (Part 2) coming in at No. 8 with $1.34 billion. As of 2015, the Harry Potter series is the second-highest grossing film franchise of all time. Its eight films have grossed more than $7.7 billion worldwide.”

- Sorry, Harold Bloom. Harry Potter is here to stay in large part because it encourages students to transform themselves into agents of social change by challenging perceptions about racism, prejudice, discrimination, and negative behaviors toward stigmatized groups.
LEAD FROM BEHIND TO HEAR FUTURE VOICES

FRAME THE UNFAMILIAR
The Upside-Down is an extreme subversion of reality highlights the slipperiness of language, and its inability to ever completely signify
“You can try to ignore or act like you are not influenced by stuff but . . . You absorb and adapt and it becomes some new thing . . . everything evolves from things you have experienced . . . And you experiment . . . so it’s always about finding new things . . .” (Dixson and Stein 02:05).

- POLARIZATION CREATES “ECHO CHAMBERS” THAT PREVENT PEOPLE FROM BEING EXPOSED TO INFORMATION THAT CONTRADICTS THEIR PRE-EXISTING BELIEFS.
Course Framework: Negotiated Space - Framework

• Science Fiction and Horror work to articulate social and personal anxieties, and demonstrate how they can be negotiated.

• *Stranger Things* depicts numerous anxieties from adolescence and growing up to technology and genetics.
# INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>LITERATURE REVIEW</th>
<th>EXPOS-E-TORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEXT TO SELF</td>
<td>TEXT TO TEXT</td>
<td>TEXT TO WORLD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAMILIAR</td>
<td>UNFAMILIAR</td>
<td>FAMILI-ARITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I)DENTITY</td>
<td>(CON)VERSATION</td>
<td>(RE) DISCOVERY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I SAY</td>
<td>THEY SAY</td>
<td>THEY SAY/I SAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STANCE</td>
<td>PERCEPTION</td>
<td>PARTICIPATING</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"Academic writing calls upon writers not simply to express their own ideas, but to do so as a response to what others have said . . . 'to participate in ongoing conversations about vitally important academic and public issues . . . 'intellectual writing is almost always composed in response to others' texts’” (Graff).
Keene and Zimmerman (1997) concluded that students comprehend better when they make different kinds of connections: Text-to-self, Text-to-text, Text-to-text, Text-to-world.

"Text to text, text to self, text to world... Leave it to school to take the fun out of texting."
"It is always a good tactic to begin your response not by launching directly into a mass of details but by stating clearly whether you agree, disagree, or both, using a direct, no-nonsense formula such as: 'I agree,' 'I disagree,' or 'I am of two minds. I agree that ___________________, but I cannot agree that ___________________.' Once you have offered one of these straightforward statements . . . readers will have a strong grasp of your position and then be able to appreciate the complications you go on to offer as your response unfolds” (Graff 55).
• Practice: Write what you know – the familiar.

• Stranger Things shows characters adapting, being influenced, forming ideas and facing opposing perspectives about those experiences within the context of particular situations.

• From those experiences, characters experiment with power that was already inside of them to problem-solve and seek resolutions. This is a catalyst that can launch change.
Use the familiar to convey meaning in unfamiliar areas.

Using films, media, and television shows is a way to show students’ willingness to meet them where they are and from “the other side.”

Electrify curiosity and increase retention by establishing the classroom as a “say it safe” negotiated and not a polarized space.
Stranger Things depicts numerous anxieties from adolescence and growing up to technology and genetics.

Normal, Familiar, Known = Hawkins, IN
Defined = Everyone knows everyone, children play outdoors
Characters reveal lack of vocabulary to articulate what is out there and defer signification by referring to things that are known.
Works Cited
Wandering through Middle Earth to the Reality Beyond

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What if . . .

. . . wandering through a fantasy story on the pages of a book could help you to gain a clearer view of the reality that surrounds you?
I would argue that social change begins with changes in thinking, perspective and understanding in the students themselves, changes that can happen as a result of interacting in meaningful ways with what they are reading and writing.
Themed ENGL 111 Courses Encourage:

• Interest in course content
• Creative engagement with the materials, instructor & peers
• Productive mental wandering & consideration of abstract concepts
• Motivation to stay “on track” in class & complete the course
• Lasting changes in thinking, perspectives & understanding
From a Teaching Perspective--

Themed ENGL 111 courses provide an opportunity to teach the same general course objectives & requirements in new & creative ways.
Creating a new themed ENGL 111 course requires an intentional focus on course objectives and a rhetorical emphasis that will encourage:

- Critical thinking, reading & writing
- A greater awareness of contexts & connections
- A greater understanding of self, others & global community
Basic Structure of my Themed ENGL 111 Courses

• Begin with initial context-building activities and discussions during early class sessions

• Class discussions and in-class activities are built around the special theme/text but still include basic writing concepts, too

• Major writing projects relate to the special theme of the course, but still meet the same objectives and requirements of the general ENGL 111 course

• Final exam as essay & game show-type competition
Major Writing Projects in *The Lord of the Rings*-themed ENGL 111:

- Personal Memoir Essay
- Rhetorical Analysis Essay
- Synthesis Essay
- Argumentative Research Essay
- Final Reflection Essay
Specific Concepts/Ideas Handled in this LOTR-themed course:

- Authorship
- Origin of Ideas/concepts for writing
- Description
- Awareness of Audience
- Revising Strategies
- Collaboration
- Analysis
- Importance of Context
- Fantasy versus Allegory
- Relationships
- Truth
- Heroes & Average Guys
- War & Peace
- Vice & virtue
- Morals & Character
- Fantasy & Reality
- Diversity & Gender
- Culture & Language
A Few Cautionary Notes:

• Fun & Frustration (at times) for all involved
• Flexibility is required!
• Time-consuming/“labor of love”
• Students need to begin with a clear understanding of the requirements & expectations for the course
• Largely reliant on others to promote the course & there is often no guarantee on enrollment until the last minute
• Struggling readers/writers & non-native speakers of English may struggle with the material
• Decisions on texts & additional resources matter!
Noted Benefits for Students:

• Fun, interesting material for discussions, activities & assignments
• Learned time-management & organization
• Gained new confidence in selves as student-scholars
• Learned much about writing process & author intention due to Tolkien’s notes about his revising strategies
• Students liked being able to write about things that connected with what they were reading
• Lasting impact as students considered themselves & life beyond the classroom
Productive Wandering in Themed ENGL 111 Courses Allows Students to Engage with Reading, Writing & Thinking in New & Different Ways.

May they continue to wander, explore, change & grow into the leaders and change-makers that we need in our world today!
Sports

A Themed Course for First-Year College Composition

Steve Lively, Assistant Professor of English

@AskMrLively
Sports-themed Course and the College’s Strategic Plan

- Ivy Tech’s Strategic Plan
  - Goal One: Student Success
  - Goal Two: Recruitment and Enrollment
Inspiration for Course

- “On the Heels of Harry Potter”
- New Approach to Students
- Unifying Potential of Sports
- Rise in Engagement --> Rejuvenated Instructor
- **Required Course** on Paper; Elective Course in Classroom
Shifting from Traditional Course to Themed Course

- Finding, reading, and sharing *useful source material*
- Modifying existing assignment information (Assignment Sheets*)
- Modifying existing scoring rubrics
- Creating appealing and practical activities
Texts Used/Considered for Sports-themed Course

- “The Matheny Manifesto”
- *Sports Illustrated* articles from [SI Archives web page](http://www.sportsillustrated.com/)
- Various rule books
- Literary works* with a sports connection
- Nonfiction**, esp. those concerning societal issues
First-Year Composition Assignments

Expository Writings*
- Personal or Literacy Narrative
- Text / Rhetorical Analysis
- Profile
- Research-based Argumentative Essay
  - Source Evaluation
  - Annotated Bibliography

Themed Course Equivalent
- Significant Sports Memory
- Sporting Equipment Advertisement Analysis
- Profile of Charitable Athlete
- “Affirmative Action within Professional Sports Coaching”
Sports-themed Course - Opportunity

● “Brief Introduction to Sports Journalism”
  ○ Draft/Revise a column covering a sanctioned sporting event
    ■ fixed word count
  ○ Interview player(s) or coach(es); other journalists(?)
  ○ Exhibit understanding of “Reporters’ Questions”
Most Popular Assignment

● 21st Century Youth Sports - Coach/Administrator “Welcome Speech”
   ○ Read The Matheny Manifesto*
   ○ Create and Present on Team/League Expectations
     ■ Critical Thinking (Taking on Role as Coach or League President)
       ● Intended Audience = Parents/Guardians and/or Players
     ■ Opportunity for Public Speaking
     ■ Learning/Application of Technological Material
Culminating Project - Online Portfolio > Exam

Students create a Google Page that features the following:

- Reflection Essay*
- Organized Collection of Revised Course Assignments
- Visual Aides from Public Domain
- Additional Content**
Challenges in Year One [1 of 2]

- **Advertising**
  - On-campus fliers
  - Word-of-mouth

- **Advising**
  - Advisors (full-time or faculty) should have access to specific course descriptions and advance notice of any off-campus responsibilities/requirements
    - Example - A Report on a sanctioned sporting event
Challenges in Year One [2 of 2]

● Availability
  ○ Only one section offered in Fall 2018 - a co-requisite class
  ○ Only 22 seats total; 11 open to all; 11 open to co-req students
  ○ Offered in F2F format only

● Course Labeling
  ○ Some first-day students were unaware of themed course
    ■ Among those, one student dropped immediately
    ■ At least two were pleasantly surprised
Input and Samples from Students*

“Youth Sports Presentation” - Student Feedback

In-class journal - A response to “The Matheny Manifesto” (student sample)

Sports Report (student sample)

Final Portfolio - Google Pages option (student sample)
The Future of “English Composition - Sports” [1of 2]

● Continue to adjust course material (mainly OERs)
● Create meaningful assignments that fit course outline of record
● Incorporate technological opportunities
The Future of “English Composition - Sports” [2 of 2]

- Devote class time to developing online portfolio of revised material
- Create online course version
- Advertise and Inform Advisors of course information
Best Practices [1 of 2]

- Discuss first with program chair/dean; “ease into it”
- Collaborate with Colleagues
  - Workshop opportunities for future themes
- Clearly state objective of themed course to students at first meeting
Best Practices [2 of 2]

- Pursue Open Educational Resources (OERs)
- Continue use of familiar textbook/handbook during first semester
- Request student feedback on assignments and course
Our Panel

- Susan Howard (Harry Potter) – showard62@ivytech.edu
- Deborah Morris (Lord of the Rings) – dmorris99@ivytech.edu
- Therese Leone-Unger (Stranger Things) – tleoneunger@ivytech.edu
- Steve Lively (sports) – slively@ivytech.edu
Questions/Discussions (?)
Best Practices for Teaching Harry Potter

IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

BY SUSAN HOWARD

IVY TECH COMMUNITY COLLEGE FORT WAYNE
Introduce students to Communication Theory

- Students are introduced to the definition of rhetoric, the neo-Aristotelian Triangle and the Rhetorical Rhombus. The students learn how the ability to write or speak effectively is represented via Aristotle's three arguments or appeals.
- They also learn how rhetoric can be used to make readers feel or act a certain way. How are students made to feel as a result of reading Harry Potter novels? What are some of the issues that the text addresses even though author J.K. Rowling's purpose is not presented explicitly?
Writing Task #1: A conversation with Harold Bloom

• After students are "sorted" into their respective Hogwarts' Houses (Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin), they are introduced to Harold Bloom's *Wall Street Journal* article where he denounces the Harry Potter series.

• Students tackle a statement Bloom makes in a 2012 C-Span interview where he questions whether the Harry Potter series will lead students to read more challenging books. "Will they [Harry Potter readers] go on to Alice in Wonderland. . .will they go on to high literature? Will they go on to Mark Twain, Hemingway, and Jane Austin?" Students address Bloom’s question in their first writing task.
Freewriting for the Personal Literacy Narrative

• Students are assigned to write a personal literacy narrative that focuses on their relationship with the Harry Potter series. In it, students must address several questions such as when they were first introduced to the series, why they enjoy the series, what they have learned from it, whether the series is didactic (this word is usually a new one for the students), and they must craft an apologia in response to Harold Bloom's criticism of the series.

• The freewriting is geared to help students generate ideas for their rough draft of the personal literacy narrative.
Writing a book review and NOT a book report

• Students are assigned to find a book review of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* from a reputable source such as the *New York Times, Publisher’s Weekly, The Guardian*, etc. The assignment is to use the article as a guide in writing their own book review of Rowling’s first book.

• We discuss the difference between book *reviews* versus book *reports*. Students are familiar with the latter, but the former gets to the heart of challenges students in a first-year composition class will face: how to analyze a text rather than just merely regurgitating what happens in the text.

• But before students can start this assignment, they are introduced to the basic fantasy motifs, mythologist Joseph Campbell’s explanation of "the hero's quest," and how these elements contribute to the appreciation or understanding of Rowling's work. Students are encouraged to select a fantasy motif (magic, heroism, good versus evil, etc.) to focus on in their book review so as to explain to the reader why *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* is worth reading.
The informative research-based essay

- The second major assignment for students is an informative research-based essay on how Harry Potter changed the world.
- Now students are assigned to write about the impact of the Harry Potter phenomenon on the world. They must attend a library instruction session where they learn the difference between primary and secondary sources along with the difference between non-academic and scholarly sources. Students are assigned to find a scholarly peer-reviewed article as a source for this paper.
- They are also required to develop their own primary source by having an interview with someone with a unique viewpoint about the impact of the Harry Potter series. Students are encouraged to find an English teacher who has used the series in their classroom, a librarian who is familiar with children's and young adult literature, an avid fan of the series, etc. I even had one student find a counselor to interview who used the Harry Potter books in some of her therapy sessions with children.
Rhetorical Analysis of a chapter from a Harry Potter novel

- Students learn about the Rhetorical Situation and how to write a Rhetorical Analysis essay, which is their Midterm Examination Essay Examination. Again, the challenge is in helping them avoid writing mere plot summaries, but this is the same problem faced by students in non-themed English Composition courses. Students must write a timed essay 1,200 to 1,500-word rhetorical analysis during a class period (my classes meet for three hours, once a week) after completing a 20-question test. The essay must be written about a chapter the student has selected from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* or *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. 
Rhetorical Analysis questions or writing prompts to address

- Questions or writing prompts that students can choose from include:
  - What is the overall theme or message of the text?
  - What might different types of readers think or feel after reading this text?
  - Why?(How) Does this text create connections between its subject and other subjects?
  - What gets emphasized? How is it emphasized (e.g. repetition, strong wording, space devoted to it)?
  - What seems to be the writer’s attitude toward the subject? What makes you think this?
  - What does the text want you to think (very few just “inform”)? What makes you think this?
  - What reasons might the writer have for writing this? What makes you think so?
“No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood,” he [Draco Malfoy] spat.

- How can Harry Potter novels encourage students to be agents of social change?
- Students start to examine how the Harry Potter series can be used as a tool to promote social change as we read and examine parts of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* that address miscegenation, so-called blood purity (or the difference between "Pure-blood" and "Mudblood [or "dirty blood"]), discrimination and prejudice. This theme is also present as it relates to the enslavement of the house elves. Students evaluate the novels' presentation of these subjects through the analysis of selected themes and characters from the various novels, starting with *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.*
The Final Step: evaluative annotated bibliographies and an argumentative paper

- Students are taught how to write evaluative annotated bibliographies for the four sources (this includes one of the Harry Potter novels that the student wants to focus on) they need for the Argumentative Research paper project.
- They must have one primary source based on a personal interview (many students use the same interviewee that they had for the Informative research-based paper), at least one scholarly peer-reviewed article, and an article from a reputable news source. This is a good time to review how to evaluate sources, especially those found on the Internet.
- Students determine their own research questions and are encouraged to build their theme or focus on the scholarly peer-reviewed article they have selected. Research questions or topics have included: Is Hermione a feminist? Is Harry Potter a Christ figure? How does the Harry Potter series address slavery? Prejudice?