

Literature Circles for Students With Learning Disabilities

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The term literature circle refers to a classroom instructional strategy that connects all aspects of literacy for students with varied interests and levels of reading achievement. Although general education teachers commonly use literature circles, special education teachers have used this strategy much less frequently. Literature circles lend themselves particularly well to inclusionary settings as they involve small heterogeneous reading groups that explore content within a collaborative structure that allows students the opportunity to listen, reflect, and share thoughts about literature. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are reciprocally reinforced through literature circle group work. This article provides a step-by-step description of literature circle implementation that supports the needs of students with learning disabilities.

Keywords: reading; instruction; literature circles; literacy

According to Daniels (2002), tens of thousands of teachers have implemented literature circles in their classrooms, which translates into millions of students who have engaged in this type of literacy instruction. Literature circles have assumed a prominent place in the curriculum in the United States and Canada (Heydon, 2003), as well as the United Kingdom (Allan, Ellis, & Pearson, 2005). Classroom teachers are implementing literature circles at all grade levels, and the topic regularly appears on professional conference programs, as well as in books and journal articles (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). Book clubs have gained increasing popularity as teachers and researchers have discovered the effectiveness of this approach. In 1996, the International Reading Association and the National Council for Teachers of English (1996) both endorsed the use of literature circles as a recommended strategy for increasing literacy skills.

Even though research has demonstrated the effectiveness of literature circles for general education classrooms, teachers of students with learning disabilities have not embraced this strategy with the same enthusiasm as their colleagues have. In fact, when Drecktrah and Chiang (1997) surveyed general educators and special

education teachers in reference to instructional strategies used for teaching reading and writing, they found that only 24% of elementary-grade teachers who work with students with learning disabilities had used this strategy, compared with 44% of the second-grade teachers and 48% of fifth-grade teachers in general education. However, teachers of students with disabilities who have implemented this strategy have found promising results (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002). Classroom experience supports the use of this approach for students with learning disabilities as well as for those with general reading achievement problems. Literature circles are, in fact, ideal for increasing oral language, reading, and writing achievement in a supportive, collaborative learning environment.

Literature circles are effective because they are dynamic; they encourage maximum opportunities for student involvement. They empower students to become teachers and leaders in a collaborative milieu that changes the climate of the classroom to one that is more supportive and encourages academic risk taking (Burns, 1998). In the everyday classroom structure, it is typically the highly verbal or high-achieving students who demonstrate academic strengths that place them in the

center of classroom activity. The students with reading achievement problems are the ones who appear to be peripheral to this classroom activity. But literature circles provide the unique opportunity for all class members to shine. One teacher reported hearing one of the top students in a fifth-grade classroom make the following observation after a lively literature circle discussion: “You know, I’ve been in this class with Michael the whole year, and I never knew how smart he was until today.” Although Michael was reading more than 2 years below grade level, he had been assigned a role that allowed him to make a significant contribution and be successful in his literature circle. In this manner, literature circles become vehicles for increasing self-determination. Experiencing successful participation in the group is likely to give students with learning disabilities a sense of confidence that previously may have seemed elusive. Students with learning disabilities may initially ask for roles with fewer responsibilities, but that quickly changes as they come to understand that they can be successful contributors.

What Are Literature Circles?

Literature circles are book clubs for children and adolescents and include organized learning activities that are aligned with the curriculum. Literature circles have been referred to by many different names, which probably has contributed to some of the confusion surrounding this strategy. These names have included *literature response groups*, *literature study circles*, *literacy circles*, *peer-led literature groups*, and *book clubs*. It is important for teachers to note that literature circles are much more highly structured than the average adult book club, which often loses literary focus for the sake of socialization. Although socialization is not the primary focus of literature circles in schools, there are many ways to incorporate social skill instruction within the context of this strategy. This is an added benefit, particularly for students with learning disabilities who struggle with interpersonal relationships. Literature circles are small, collaborative reading groups in which students assume shared responsibility for their learning, which is guided and supported by the teacher.

The Nuts and Bolts of Literature Circles

The first three guidelines (Daniels, 2002) address meeting the needs of students with learning disabilities. The fourth guideline, regarding standards and assessment, was added to describe how literature circles can address curriculum standards, which is particularly

important for both inclusive classrooms (Blum et al., 2002) and resource settings.

- Students select their own reading material and are grouped according to this choice, with different groups reading different books or the same selection.

In an ideal world, students should always have the opportunity to choose their literature circle books. In a classroom situation, sometimes the demands of the curriculum do not permit this independence. Whenever possible, teachers should follow Daniels’s (2002) recommendation for self-selection, but it should be noted that this term is a bit misleading when it comes to the implementation of literature circles. Few if any teachers permit their classes to go to the library and choose whatever books they want to read for the literature circle. First, there are practical considerations that preclude this unrestricted type of selection. Students may choose books with reading levels that are too high or too low. This may be particularly problematic for students with learning disabilities. Also, there must be a set of books sufficient in number for the group, and it would be unusual for most school libraries to have four to six copies of any given book. As a compromise, most teachers preselect and order a grouping of books from which the students can then select individual choices. The teacher can take this one step further by selecting a particular author who has written numerous books and having the students choose from that author’s work. There is considerable value to this approach as teachers can then teach the students about the author and connect the literature circles by comparison and contrast of works through discussions. In a resource classroom, it may be preferable to have the groups read the same selection if the class size is small.

- Groups meet on a regular basis to discuss the reading, with students assuming assorted task roles.

Literature circles focus primarily on peer-led discussion activities as they relate to reading selections. Many of these activities involve discussion as a secondary requirement to the task. For example, in an activity that requires a student to draw a setting and then explain the drawing to the group, the illustration is the primary task, with the discussion being secondary. Literature circle tasks are typically based on role assignments. In some literature circles, these roles will be assigned on a rotating basis. When working with students who have more-severe learning disabilities, it may be beneficial to assign roles that are kept for the entire work. For subsequent literature circles, students can then assume roles that are different from those that were held in previous literature circles. It may also be necessary to consider the task demands of a particular role in reference to a student’s learning profile. For example, a student who uses an Alpha Smart keyboard for writing activities because of visual–motor difficulties would probably not be comfortable assuming the role of Illustrator.

- Teachers are facilitators, not instructors.

Throughout the literature circle process, the teacher will serve as the facilitator of learning, not as an instructor. This is a difficult shift for many teachers of students with learning disabilities because these teachers may be used to providing

TABLE 1
Steps for Implementing an Author-Based Literature Circle

Steps	Examples
<p>Step 1: Author/book selection</p> <p>Select author Introduce author Present book “commercials” Students select books Group students</p>	<p>Roald Dahl Develop PowerPoint presentation. Visit Official Roald Dahl Web site (www.roalddahl.com). Present video, audio, or book posters. Have students choose top three out of five books (e.g., <i>The BFG</i>, <i>James and the Giant Peach</i>, <i>Matilda</i>, <i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i>, <i>The Witches</i>). Group students by book choice.</p>
<p>Step 2: Literature circle role selection and modeling</p> <p>Teacher selects roles for books</p> <p>Teacher models roles Students choose role preferences Teacher assigns roles</p>	<p>Discussion Leader, Word Wizard, Character Sketcher, Art Director, Connector Demonstrate responsibilities with literature circle role sheet activities. Choose top two role preferences from list. Make selection on basis of student choice and teacher input.</p>
<p>Step 3: Assigning and supporting reading</p> <p>Daily reading assigned Reading supported</p>	<p>Determine amount by skill level of students and level of text difficulty. Use adapted versions, screen readers, MP3 players, books on CD.</p>
<p>Step 4: Literature circle role sheet and role expansion activities</p> <p>Implement role sheet activities</p> <p>Replace literature circle role sheets with more-creative activities</p>	<p>Select activities from online role materials (e.g., www.edselect.com/Docs/Litcir.pdf) or role sheet books (e.g., Moen & Artell, 2004). Have students journal, develop character fandex, make murals, make electronic scrapbooks, do WebQuests, etc.</p>
<p>Step 5: Assessment</p> <p>Align literature circle role activity with instructional standards Design portfolio Select assessment techniques</p>	<p>Develop assessment grid (Table 2). Choose format (e.g., electronic portfolios, hard copies). Select/develop rubrics from online sources (e.g., rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php or www.rubrics4teachers.com).</p>

very direct instruction. However, research has demonstrated that both typical students and those with learning disabilities believe that they learn more and have a preferable experience when they are working in collaborative mixed-ability groups (Elbaum, Schumm, & Vaughn, 1997). It is also helpful to remember that there isn't a teacher in an adult book club, which is the model for this instructional strategy. Teachers must assume a more dominant role in the beginning of the unit in order to teach necessary concepts and roles but gradually withdraw this support as the groups assume increasing responsibility. If teachers do not provide sufficient modeling, it is unlikely that the students will be able to successfully take over responsibility for the circles.

- Circle activity is aligned with curriculum standards and systematically assessed.

In most school districts, there is significant focus on the attainment of curriculum standards. Although teachers may be afforded creativity in the selection of reading material, the instruction must be aligned with content standards. Literature circle instruction is highly structured in practice. Likewise, assessment systems must be systematically applied so that teachers have the data to support the effectiveness of this strategy. Authentic assessment techniques provide the preferable means of documenting progress for literature circle activity. Portfolios that include products and completed rubrics demonstrating the effectiveness of the process are recommended.

Getting the Circles Rolling

The following step-by-step procedure will provide the instructions for literature circles that can be used in resource or inclusionary classrooms. In inclusionary settings, it is ideal to have a general educator as well as a special educator teaming. Table 1 provides an overview of the procedures for literature circle implementation.

Step 1: Author and Book Selection

It is recommended that teachers start with a series of books written by the same author. For fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, Roald Dahl is a particularly engaging author for whom almost all children have great interest. He has written 16 works of fiction for children, which provides the teacher with many choices. The first literature circle lesson can feature the author, with background information about his life and work. Typically this lesson involves a PowerPoint presentation with pictures of the author, his family, his home, and in this case a virtual field trip to the Roald Dahl museum at the official Web site. Teachers who do not have an Internet

connection in the classroom can cut and paste various activities from the Web site into the PowerPoint presentation. It is recommended that the author introduction conclude with a chocolate tasting as this activity is particularly relevant to Roald Dahl's childhood experience. As the story goes, when Dahl was in boarding school, the town's resident candy company, Cadbury, sent sample boxes of chocolates to the students for tasting. Apparently Dahl was fascinated with this chocolate tasting and dreamed of developing a new flavor, which may have influenced him to write *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* later in life. Students enjoy hearing the story while tasting different varieties of Cadbury's chocolate in the classroom.

Following the author introduction unit, commercials for the books selected for the literature circles are provided. In each of these commercials, the teacher presents the book for viewing, gives a partial story line, and reads one or two passages. This information may be complemented with video segments of the story. Whenever possible, it is preferable to use video segments of the book to pique student interest. Audio commercials focus on listening to segments of books on tape or CD, which is a second favorite. When neither a video nor an audio version is available, book posters that include relevant pictures or artifacts from the book can be used.

Five seems to be the optimal number of participants to assign to each group, but four or six work nearly as well. For the special education resource classroom, there may be one or two groups. In the average general education class, with approximately 25 students, optimally there would be five books and five literature circles with five students in each, give or take a couple of students. Students complete preference forms with their top three choices. Teachers can remind them that although not everyone may be assigned the first choice, they all will have the opportunity to read at least one of their choices. As a postscript to this section, teachers should consider that sometimes one single book for the whole class is a preferable way to begin literature circle implementation. If the teacher decides to use only one book, then the students can vote on the class's book instead of on individual selections. Grouping in literature circles should not be based on reading ability, a common error. Literature circles are by definition heterogeneous groups. In the general education setting, teachers should resist any temptation to group students with learning disabilities separately. There are supports that can be provided for reading problems, which will be discussed later, but teachers should understand that the group process is the primary means of accommodation.

Step 2: Literature Circle Role Selection and Modeling

Selection of roles for a particular literature circle unit can be challenging. When teachers first begin reading about literature circles, they will discover a dizzying array of possibilities. This can cause considerable confusion initially as teachers may not understand which roles would be preferable from an instructional point of view. Daniels (2002) described four basic roles that he considers to be fundamental. These roles and accompanying responsibilities are (a) *connector* (connecting the reading material to everyday experiences), (b) *questioner* (analyzing text through questioning), (c) *literary luminary* (highlighting particularly important parts of the text), and (d) *illustrator* (graphically responding to the text). He recommended adding other roles on the basis of the teacher's need in reference to the books selected. For example, if the students are reading historical fiction (e.g., *My Brother Sam Is Dead*; Collier & Collier, 2003), a *timeliner* (a student who keeps track of the occurrence of events) may be an important addition. Some special education teachers tend to use a connector consistently and to include the roles of *character sketcher* (a student responsible for analyzing characters) and *word wizard* (a student responsible for vocabulary) in all literature circles because they perceive these roles as particularly important for developing comprehension and vocabulary for students with learning disabilities. Many teachers also consider a discussion leader, which is similar to Daniels's (2002) questioner, to be an important role. Instead of an illustrator, the role of *art director* can be helpful because this designation expands the student's responsibilities. The role of literary luminary is sometimes too challenging for elementary-level literature circles, but it is highly valuable for middle and secondary settings. The list of resources at the end of this article provides information about additional roles that can be chosen.

Before modeling the roles, the teacher should read a portion of a selected book to the class. If the class is reading the same book, the modeling activity is easier because everyone is on the same page. However, if the groups all have different selections, the teacher must focus on modeling the role instead of the role in relation to particular content. The modeling must explicitly demonstrate the responsibilities of the chosen roles (i.e., discussion leader, character sketcher, word wizard, connector, and art director).

After all the chosen roles have been modeled, the teacher must decide whether roles will be assigned for only 1 day and then rotated or whether group members will keep their roles for a longer time. If the class

comprises a large number of students with learning disabilities, it is recommended that roles be kept for a minimum of 2 days before rotation. It is also suggested that name tags and roles be used as a reminder of role responsibility. Initially teachers may have problems with organization because many students have difficulty remembering their assigned roles. The use of name tags reduces confusion for the teacher and students, who can tell at a glance what an individual's role is. Even in a resource classroom with far fewer students, name badges serve as a prompt to the students.

Step 3: Assigning and Supporting Reading

The amount of assigned reading will be determined by the difficulty of the text and the grade level of the students. In situations when teachers cannot count on the reading to be done as homework, it is a good idea to set aside in-class reading time to make sure that all students have read the assigned content.

One of the challenges of working with students with learning disabilities in the general education setting is to provide reading support that allows maximum participation. For some books, adapted versions at more appropriate reading levels are the solution. For other books, including classics such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) or *The Jungle Book* (1894), digital reading content can be accessed through free electronic book sites, such as the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (n.d.). Once the text is digitized, a software reader (e.g., AspireREADER) can be used to support a student's reading. When funds are not available for commercial screen readers, free text-to-speech software (e.g., ReadPlease) can be used for the same purpose. This software has the capacity to read the material at varying speeds so that a student with a learning disability can read along with the voice. However, in the case of the Roald Dahl books or other more recent novels, the writing will be protected by copyright and cannot be accessed through a screen reader. Thus, other possibilities, such as books on CD or tape, can support the student's reading. More recently, teachers have begun to use MP3 players, which provide greater portability for the student. Technology supports are preferable to adapted versions because the students read the same text as their peers do. These technological supports are excellent for enhancing fluency.

Step 4: Literature Circle Role Sheet and Role Expansion Activities

For teachers who are just starting out, literature circle role sheets are recommended. These can be purchased

I dont think giants should eat people. The giant shouldnt eat people because it is cannibalism and cannibalism is illegal. there is a reson it is illegal. I think that reson is it's murder and if you murder someone other people will be depressed. Instead the giants could eat corn because the is numerous amounts of corn in the world. that is why I think giants should not eat people

Figure 1. Discussion director persuasive writing activity for *The BFG*.

commercially or found online. Elliott and Mays (n.d.) have posted a literature circle starter kit that provides a great introduction for teachers who are implementing their first literature circles. This document includes sample role sheets, as well as other supportive materials.

The examples in Figures 1 through 3 show sample role activities that were all completed for Dahl's book *The BFG*. Figure 1 shows a role activity that has been completed by a discussion leader. The three-part task was to (a) decide whether giants should be eating people, (b) write this viewpoint, and (c) discuss it with all the students in the literature circle, who may well have different opinions. Figure 2 illustrates a character sketcher role activity that involved generating descriptors that applied to a particular character and integrating these into a brief paragraph.

Figure 3 provides an example of a role activity for an art director, whose task was to draw an illustration of a particular passage. After reading the passage to the circle, the student explained why the illustration featured those particular characteristics.

Teachers should understand that role sheets are generally considered to be a beginning point for understanding literature circle task roles, meaning that once a teacher is familiar with the role process, task role sheets should be replaced with more creative role assignments. For example, after the discussion leader shares the viewpoint regarding giants eating people (Figure 1), the teacher can ask the group to write a letter-to-the-editor essay to persuade readers to take the opposite position. After the character sketcher presents the character description, the student can lead the circle in the design and development of a *character fandex*. Basically, these

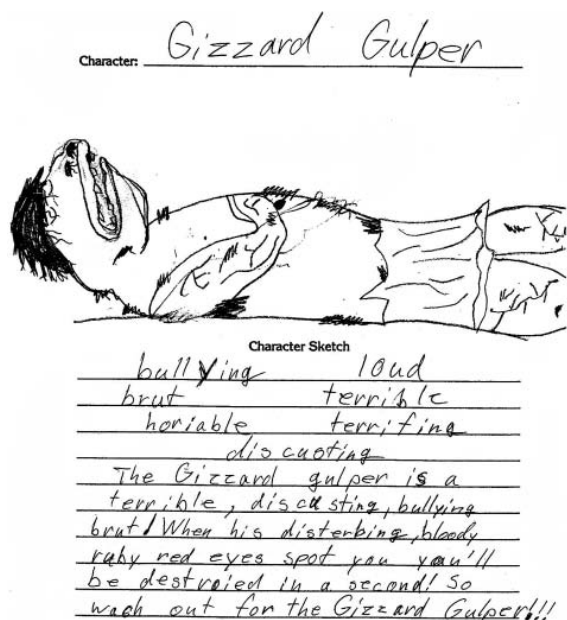


Figure 2. Character sketcher role sheet for *The BFG*.

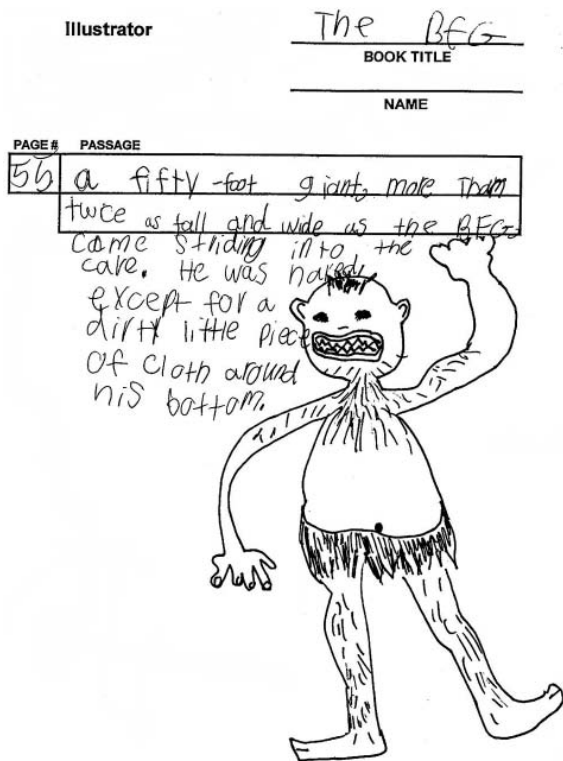


Figure 3. Art director role sheet for *The BFG*.

American presidents, Shakespearean plays, famous artists). The art director can take the chosen passage and illustration (see Figure 3) to lead the group in starting a mural that will feature a series of important passages and illustrations that will be a work-in-progress as the story unfolds.

Many teachers use student journals instead of role sheets to record all literature circle activity. Some teachers use different colored sticky notes for students to identify important parts of the book and to record information about characters, plot, and setting, and others prefer to use electronic portfolios or scrapbooks. In the beginning, role sheets provide needed assistance in learning about roles, but they are really the training wheels for the process.

Step 5: Assessment

Alignment of standards with literature circle activity can be demonstrated by developing an assessment grid with the roles on one axis and the standards on the other. Table 2 shows an example of language arts standards across the top of the page and the literature circle roles used as labels for the rows. Although the top five roles for circles may be the most frequently used, the additional roles are included because they may be needed for other book selections. The boxes in the grid can be checked to provide documentation of specific grade level indicators that are addressed by role activity.

With regard to role activity, there is likely to be overlap with regard to grade level indicators, but there will also be differences. Once the teacher has developed the grid with the standards and chosen roles, the standards summary sheet provides a record of instructional coverage of required content. It is recommended that teachers develop grids for each of the grade levels they are teaching. In the beginning, it takes some time to analyze the standards within a literature circle perspective, but once this is accomplished, the teacher can make minor modifications according to the role activity and use the same basic grid for all classes. It is an excellent accountability tool.

A simple way to assess knowledge of content is to give the students a pre-post test with 20 multiple-choice questions. However, this type of assessment is really inappropriate for measuring the extent of learning that typically occurs in literature circles, and it is not aligned with the standards that have been identified. Teachers can expect to see growth in oral language skills as well as in reading achievement and writing, plus specific growth in the standards areas. For these

learning aids are homemade versions of the Fandex Field Guides (n.d.), which are a series of cards that highlight important information related to a topic (e.g.,

	Acquisition of Vocabulary (determining meaning of words within text, understanding denotation & connotation)	Reading Process (answering questions, self-monitoring comprehension, generating questions, reading independently)	Reading Applications/ Informational (understanding cause & effect, using text features to locate information)	Reading Applications/ Literary Text (explaining points of view, identifying plot events & themes)	Writing Applications (writing responses to novels, providing interpretation, producing informal writing)	Writing Conventions (understanding & applying punctuation, grammar, & spelling rules)	Research (generating open-ended questions for research)	Communications/ Oral and Visual (demonstrating active listening, asking focus questions, drawing conclusions, delivering information)
Discussion Leader								
Character Sketcher								
Word Wizard								
Connector								
Art Director								
Setting Locator								
Time Liner								
Plot Person								
Summarizer								
Historian								

Figure 4. Alignment of literature roles with language arts standards.

reasons, a typical approach is a portfolio, in which the students keep a record of all learning activities to demonstrate their accomplishments. Within the portfolios, recordkeeping involves checking the instructional standards as they are addressed with the standards summary sheet (see Table 2) and using rubrics to assess the achievement that occurred in these specific areas. Assessment for literature circles is different from typical assessment, in which all students are evaluated simultaneously. With literature circles, the rubrics can be implemented to assess ability to fulfill role responsibilities. The teacher uses assessment techniques on a daily basis, but the assessments are tied to the responsibilities of the roles, which are likely to change frequently. In each student's portfolio, there will be a copy of the completed standards grid, the role or activity rubrics, and the learning activities that demonstrate accomplishments.

Conclusion

Even if the first literature circle doesn't go exactly as planned, many teachers will be hooked after the initial experience. It is very gratifying to see struggling readers engaged and successfully participating in literature circles, which is typically what happens. It is exciting to watch students of all abilities support one another and take ownership and responsibility for the learning that occurs within their group. Literature circles have the potential to foster both oral and written language growth, while at the same time encouraging collaboration among class members. It is a creative instructional strategy that can be aligned easily with curriculum standards, an alignment sometimes difficult to achieve otherwise. In addition to increasing language skills and self-determination, there is a strong possibility that literature circles will instill a new appreciation of literacy among struggling readers, which perhaps would be the greatest benefit of all.

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Appendix Recommended Resources

Literature Circle Books

- Daniels, H., & Steineke, N. (2004). *Mini-lessons for literature circles*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Noe, K. L. S., & Johnson, N. J. (1999). *Getting started with literature circles*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Screen Readers

- AspireREADER, Aqueous Technologies, Camp Pine Brook, NJ
- ReadPlease. (n.d.). Retrieved April 3, 2007, from <http://www.readplease.com/>

Literature Circle Role Sheets

- Elliott, P., & Mays, D. (n.d.). *Literature circles*. Retrieved April 3, 2007, from <http://www.edselect.com/Docs/Litcir.pdf>
- Moen, C. B., & Artell, M. (2004). *Literature circle role sheets for fiction and nonfiction books*. Carthage, IL: Teaching & Learning.

Rubric Development

- Rubistar. (n.d.). Retrieved May 23, 2008, from <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>
- Rubrics4Teachers. (n.d.). Retrieved May 23, 2008, from <http://www.rubrics4teachers.com/>

Roald Dahl Books & Web Site

- The Official Roald Dahl Web Site (<http://www.roalddahl.com>).
- The witches*. (1989). New York: Puffin.
- The BFG*. (1985). New York: Puffin.
- Charlie and the chocolate factory*. (1994). New York: Puffin.
- James and the giant peach*. (1973). New York: Puffin.
- Matilda*. (1990). New York: Puffin.
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- Kipling, R. (1894). *The jungle book*. New York: Macmillan.
- Project Gutenberg Literary Archives. (n.d.). Retrieved May 23, 2008, from http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page
- Twain, M. (1885). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Charles L. Webster.