



GETTING STARTED WITH AOW

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of the Teaching the Core blog

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by Dave Stuart Jr.
of the [Teaching the Core](#) Blog

*This guide is dedicated to teachers who seek to dominate the manifold challenges to the classroom. May we continue to **bring it**, every day.*

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Introduction:

Hi, I'm Dave.

If you've been around the Teaching the Core blog long, you know I have a tendency to learn things through doing. I'm all about taking edu-theory and making it practical.

For that reason, I appreciate Kelly Gallagher, a full-time teacher who also writes and speaks to other full-time teachers--here is another man who seems to learn through doing. It was from Kelly's [Readicide](#) that I first came across the idea of the Article of the Week (AoW), and for that my students and I owe him a debt of gratitude.

In the 3 years or so that I've run AoW in my classroom, my students have had the opportunity to closely read, write about, and discuss over 120 articles (about 40 per year). I'm proud of that number, and I'm proud to add to it with each passing week (except for those weird ones with 2 or 3 days in them--you know what I'm talking about).

With that being said, I also think my hairline has receded a few centimeters over the course of my AoW implementation. There have been (and still are!) Friday's where I've not gotten 50% of these things turned in. And so I need to stress, from the start, that this isn't a guide toward having 100% of your students turn in AoWs every week (if anyone figures that out, please, for the love of all that is sweet and spicy, ***tell me your secret!***). Rather, my hope is that this guide will help you learn enough to get started and starting learning through doing, just like every other great teacher in the world does every day on the job.

As always, I covet your feedback, advice, triumphs, and failures--share them [here](#) (contact form, for those of you reading this in print), [here](#) (Facebook), or [here](#) (Twitter).

It's a privilege and a pleasure to work with teachers and others who have a stake in increasing literacy in schools.

Yours,

Dave Stuart Jr.

[Amateur alpine hornblower](#)

November 2013

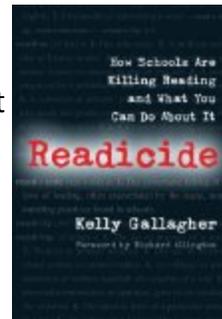


Chapter 1:

How I first learned about AoW

I first learned about AoW from my boy Kelly Gallagher. (By “my boy,” I mean I’ve never met him, except in a strange, rated-PG dream one time in which I flew to California and he consulted me on my instructional practices for 5 minutes.)

In [Readicide](#), a book you need to buy right now, Gallagher, in a discussion of how to prevent reader-killing, Gallagher argues we need to “augment the curriculum by surrounding the core curriculum with as much real-world text as possible” (46). He recounts a time when he realized that multiple classes of his students at the time couldn’t identify the current Vice President of the United States. Basically, his students were “light years away from being multitextual readers [i.e., folks who garner reading from a number of different sources]” (47).



I'll let Kelly tell the story from here:

“One way I addressed this problem in my classroom was by adding a weekly reading task I call ‘The Article-of-the-Week.’ These are real-world writings taken from straight news stories, essays, editorials, blogs, and speeches. I cull them from newspapers, magazines, and websites. Sometimes the articles are related to the unit we are currently studying and sometimes they are completely unrelated, but all the articles have one purpose--to broaden my students’ knowledge of the world. This past school year, for example, my students read and studied more than thirty different articles.”

Since he started AoW at Magnolia High School, the entire English department has gotten on board with the idea, meaning that, if a kid stays at Magnolia all 4 years, he or she will have had the chance to closely read approximately 140 articles while at high school.

Quick facts regarding the Gallagher approach:

- AoW is distributed every Monday and collected every Friday.
- With every article Gallagher assigns, students are to
 - demonstrate evidence of close reading,
 - highlight their confusion,
 - answer questions at the bottom of the page (when given),
 - write a 1+ page reflection in their writer’s notebooks.

Chapter 2:

How and why I started AoW in my classroom

As soon as I read Kelly's story about his high school students not having basic knowledge about the world, I empathized: my kids were not much different. And while I knew many of them might argue they could live just fine without knowing the current Vice President of the USA, I wanted more for them than "just fine" living -- I wanted to open as many door as possible for them, allowing them to peer in and realize there are lots of interesting things happening every day, and, whether they directly impact us or not, they **do** matter.

And, from a strict literacy perspective, I agreed with Kelly that the more background knowledge I could give my students, the more they'd have to draw from when reading whatever texts their post-secondary lives demanded they understand.

So I dove in.

At first, I used Kelly's list of articles, generously kept up to date for any who desire them [at Kelly's website](#).

And eventually, when I got feeling confident enough, I started slipping in articles I was finding.

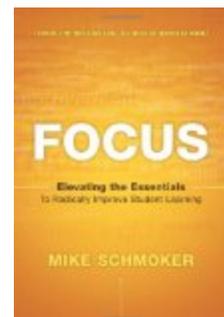
But how did you start finding articles?

It's worth mentioning that, back when I started AoWs, I was hardly more aware of current events than my students. Like many in my generation, college had helped me develop a resilient apathy towards current events; why bother with keeping up on politics or world news, I would argue, when it's all just the same old same old?

It took one more book besides *Readicide* to get me to change my tune:

Mike Schmoker's [Focus](#), in which Schmoker strongly commends the AoW and advocates for similar practices in as many classes as possible.

But Mike also offered a super helpful resource that has since gotten me hooked on current events: [TheWeek.com](#). I'll discuss the beauties of this site in the next section.



Chapter 3:

The number one resource for the teacher who has no time (or interest) to stay up on current events

The premise of TheWeek.com is simple: provide super-brief synopses and opinions on the stories that are currently driving opinion.

Unlike most news sources--name just about anything--The Week doesn't feature every story. Instead, The Week focuses on the stories that are trending on any given day. So rather than read a bunch of minutiae about, say, the rough rollout of Healthcare.gov (a big story at the time of this writing), The Week features brief articles that give a roundup of various opinions and angles that other new sites are taking on the story.

There are several reasons The Week got me hooked on current events, which made me a **much** better AoW instructor:

- there's a convenient app that I downloaded onto my phone;
- while standing in supermarket lines or whatnot, I would bust out my phone and read a few articles;
- within a few days, I'd find myself having conversations with folks who were talking about stories I had read about in The Week;
- the conversations were enjoyable enough--or, sometimes, confusing enough--to motivate me to go back to The Week and read more.

But the real payoff has been with my students: as I've taken more of an interest in current events--and, frankly, become more aware of how stories interconnect and how the world works and what the texture of our current moment in history is like--my students have taken more of an interest in current events, too.

This has helped make AoWs happen in my classroom.

Chapter 4:

Why do AoWs? How I convince my students

As you can imagine (or as you know if you've rolled out AoW already), plenty of students are resistant to the work involved with AoWs.

I use several approaches for helping my students to understand why we do AoWs and why they should give them their all.

Reason #1: They build prior knowledge, and that makes us stronger readers.

See chapter 1 :)

Reason #2: Becoming a stronger reader is critical if we are to survive the shark tank that is post-secondary life.

A fellow Freshman Comp & Lit teacher and I assign an excerpt of Common Core Appendix A for our students to read each fall. The excerpt essentially describes a well-documented phenomenon of the past 50 years:

1. Post-secondary text demands--both at college freshman and starting career level--have increased or remained constant over the past 50 years.
2. Meanwhile, K-12 text demands have decreased over the past 50 years.
3. This K-12 decrease has been both in terms of the complexity of the texts required of students **and** the complexity of the work students are expected to do with texts.

One study even found that the average gap in text complexity between 12th grade and the first year of college is **nearly 4 grade levels**. Ouch.

So I literally describe post-secondary life as a shark tank, and I tell my students that AoWs are one way I aim to train them into dolphins.

(Note: dolphins routinely dominate sharks.)

Reason #3: AoWs are often challenging, and that's good for people who want to grow their brains.

We talk a lot about **grit** in my classroom, and I explain that grit (i.e., the ability to finish what we start and focus on a task aimed at getting us to a long-term goal) is something we can

grow. Essentially, it's a muscle--the more you use grit, the stronger your grit grows.

AoW is a great, weekly routine for growing some grit.

Reason #4: AoWs let us “in” on lots of jokes.

One thing I've noticed since getting hooked on The Week is that everything from late night comedy to [The Onion](#) has become much funnier. My students start to realize this when, in the Crash Course World History videos we occasionally study in my world history courses, John Green references something like Vladimir Putin being creepy and, instead of just laughing because of the way John Green talks, they find themselves laughing because, well, [Putin really is a pretty odd head of state](#).

Get good at the “why” question

I think students are completely justified to ask questions like, “Why does this matter for my life?”

At the same time, I think they stop being justified when we find great reasons to justify the things we ask them to do--even when the reason is sometimes no more sophisticated than, say, that a task will make them grittier. But then again, we've got to constantly be working on how we explain and illustrate the insane value of grit for our students.

Answering the why is one of the hardest and most rewarding aspects of teaching--at least for me. I hope AoW gives you some more great practice at honing in on this crucial skill.

Chapter 5:

Should I introduce AoW to parents?

The short answer: definitely.

Granted, a few of your students' parents may not care, and some could outright disagree with the assignment's necessity, but most will appreciate knowing that this is a homework assignment they can expect every Monday.

To let my parents know about AoW, I do the following:

1. I include a brief description of the assignment in the syllabus my students are required to show parents during the first week of school. Granted, some of those signed acknowledgment forms could be forged or, more likely, signed without actually reading the syllabus, but some parents **do** read the syllabus and appreciate having the heads up about AoW from the get go.
2. I send a quick email out to parents during the first month of school, using the email addresses we have on file for them (and yes, just like your school, perhaps, many of our on-file emails for parents don't actually work), explaining AoW. I go with a short and sweet description that briefly answers the What-Why-How. My goal here is, again, to make parents aware that, yes, their child always has at least one homework assignment every week.
3. I have a brief overview of the "keys to success in Mr. Stuart's class" that I set in the hallway during conferences. Again, this doesn't get to all parents, but it does get to a few.

That's it.

These three simple strategies don't get 100% of parents on-board with AoWs, but they do get some.

And as a quick note, my goal with informing parents isn't to have parents hover over their child and ensure the work gets done; rather, it's to help the parent have productive conversations with their beginning high schooler that will, ultimately, lead to the student becoming an independent, functioning young adult student.

Chapter 6:

What's the simplest way to grade AoWs?

Grading is one of those things I pretty much hate. I'm not going to get into why because it would be a rambling rant of a chapter, and it would have little practical use for you, my time-constrained compatriot who has much better things to do than read a rant about something we have little control over.

So, let's just get to it: how does one grade the AoW in the simplest manner possible?

The purpose of grading these things

My goals in grading AoWs are:

1. to provide some useful feedback for my students;
2. to hold my students accountable for the work;
3. to reward those who are motivated by grades;
4. to show that I place value in the work of AoWs.

So the most difficult to achieve of those 4 goals is #1 -- providing useful feedback for my students. This is difficult because:

1. Really useful stuff is actually... well, used.
2. I have a wife, a set of offspring, and a **fragile** sanity to tend to.

So I want to provide useful feedback while at the same time not driving myself psycho. After all, this is a **weekly** assignment, and that means a whole lot of these come across my desk each Friday (well, depending on how many students turn in -- but that's a topic for [another book!](#))

So how do we provide useful--and used--feedback with super-efficiency?

Let's focus on efficiency first

As of this writing, I'm in the thick of experimenting with some ways to provide more usable feedback for students on AoWs--you'll notice in [my list of AoWs](#) that I started implementing rubrics and other features during the Fall of 2013 (the time of this writing)--and with how to have that feedback turn into... well, growth.

I still don't have a good enough answer on that topic, and, frankly, I'm not sure these kind of experiments are the best place to start.

You see, the thing that first opened me up to the idea of AoW was the fact that, in a training I went to one time, Kelly stressed that he spends as little time as possible grading these things. Basically, I took away that he checks for coherent and thoughtful annotations and coherent and thoughtful written reflections.

Some might argue this is jacked up--these kids work hard on these things, they deserve some thoughtful feedback--but Gallagher is a wise man who knows **our students need to write vastly more than we can possible grade.**

So to start out, I recommend the following grading technique:

- Allocate 5 points for the reading/annotating portion of the assignment--0 if there are no annotations, 5 if there are several thoughtful, meaty annotations per page;
- and allocate 5 points for the writing portion of the assignment--again, 0 if there's no writing at all, 5 if there's a full page or more of thoughtful, coherent thinking.

I make a simple t-chart on the front of their AoW (at right), and that at least tells them which area--reading or writing--they need to work on.

R	W
4	3

This is not perfect! For my perfectionist friends out there, please tattoo [my colleague Erica Beaton's](#) mantra on your forehead for a few days: **done is better than perfect.**

In an upcoming ebook of greater length and detail, this problem of creating useful, used, **and** efficient feedback is something I'll treat in greater depth.

(If you're interested in staying informed about that ebook, sign up for the pre-launch list [here](#) and tell me what you'd like me to research and include in it [here!](#))

Epilogue:

Do me a favor and dominate life

So if you've read this report and appreciated it, thank you! I know how strapped you are for time.

Also, if you appreciated this report and it benefitted you, there are a few things you could do that would be major favors to me, in order of preference:

1. Get in touch with me and let me know how AoWs are going in your room. Few things fulfill a teacher like hearing their work mattered; your quick note on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or by email (dave@teachingthecore.com) would mean a ton. Thanks!

2. Share what I'm doing at Teaching the Core. What started as a blog to force myself to learn the Common Core has become a mission to wage war on bad resources, bad PD, and freaking out in general. I am passionate about the latent power in America's teachers, and I despise seeing it wasted on things like stress and worry. By far the most powerful way you can share this work is through a personal email to those in your life who you think would appreciate Teaching the Core. Just tell 'em why you appreciate the blog and give 'em a link. That simple. Twitter and Facebook are cool, too.

3. Buy me a coffee. Yeah, I know—this baby was free. But I also have it listed at my online store, just in case folks say, "Dude, this guide was the bomb (or it at least saved me a headache or two)—I'd love to get you a cup of Joe for it." [Through this link](#), you'll find a simple online checkout system that lets you donate whatever you want—a dollar or **a few million dollars**. (That would be a pretty legit coffee budget.)

It's been awesome sharing this book with you. I hope you it helps out.

Yours,

Dave Stuart Jr.

Appendix:

Sample articles for different courses

Health

["The Health Risks of Energy Drinks"](#)

["Why are Smart Kids More Likely to Do Drugs"](#)

["Soda is Making Our Kids Violent"](#)

["4 Research-Supported Reasons You Should be Allowed to Nap at Work"](#)

Psychology

["11 Simple Ways to Improve your Memory"](#)

["The Lingering, Devastating Impact of Bullying"](#)

["10 Easy Ways to Build Rapport with Anyone"](#)

Business / Personal Finance

["7 Times it Makes Sense to Take a Pay Cut"](#)

["Yahoo Hasn't Really Dethroned Google... Yet"](#)

["Can Obama Make Colleges More Affordable by Rating Them?"](#)

["Raising Your Child Will Cost You \\$241,080"](#)

["Twitter's IPO: 3 Lessons From Past Public Tech Offerings"](#)

Government

["The Justice Department Messes with Texas Over Its Voter ID Law"](#)

["Will There Be a 51st State?"](#)

Science

["Will Elephants be Extinct by 2025?"](#)

["Why the Fukushima Radioactive Leak Is Worse Than We Thought"](#)