

Ann Houff Poole with James Brewbaker

Dr. Summer's Remedies for End-of-Year-Itis

The last week, ten days, or all too often, whole month of school can be a real drag. That debilitating academic malady, end-of-year-itis, takes hold of all too many boys and girls and more than a few of their teachers. The symptoms are as palpable as they are pervasive in some English classes — among students, a compulsive habit of keeping one eye on the calendar while the other attends to the year's sixth or seventh review of adjectives and adverbs, a tendency toward daydreaming of quiet summer afternoons and fishing holes, and the irresistible urge to query-complain. "How come we gotta do this stuff, Ms. Davis? Ain't you already turned in our grades?" Teachers may be similarly affected — the one-eye-on-the-calendar syndrome is one many share with students.

Summer's approach can suggest some fresh approaches to old objectives, however. Lessons in English can be transformed into lessons in using the language to communicate about the excitements of the season. The daydream about summer camp can be turned into persuasive writing; the plans for the beach can be translated into skills in map-reading and oral argument; the longing for a peaceful snooze in the sun can become library research and reporting. End-of-year assignments that justify the students' restless longings can also be designed to allow students to end the year with projects in which they can succeed, leaving pleasant memories of their last days of English class.

Since the verbal noise level in the classroom tends to rise with the warming temperatures, group work is the ideal mode for end-of-year projects (the students aren't going to shut up, so why not turn their volubility to educational advantage?). Each of the following group projects, which can take from ten to fifteen days, has been designed to appeal to groups of diversely talented students, so that those who write well may continue to shine, but those who don't know an adverb from an aardvark might also have some success. In assigning students to groups, the teacher might consider that each group could benefit from having an organizer, an artist, a writer, a mathematician or scientist, and a clown.

Ann Houff Poole is a free-lance writer and former English teacher who also works as creative director for an ad agency in Columbus, Georgia.

Once groups are assigned, they are given a choice of projects. The group will probably first want to inventory for itself the strengths of the members, noting who writes well, who can draw, who is willing to speak in front of the class, who can be trusted to make the assignments, manage the deadlines, and organize the final presentation. These strengths can be matched to the requirements of each project as the group makes its choice.

Here are four of the projects our students have found interesting and challenging, just as they appear on the hand-outs the students receive:

"Show Us the Summer!" Group Projects

1. "Come to Camp"
 - a. Make up a summer camp. Decide what kind of camp it is, who attends, how long a session is, where it is located, what the accommodations/facilities/attractions/equipment, etc., are.
 - b. Design a promotional package including:
 1. Brochure for campers describing the camp (oriented to the campers' age)
 2. Letter to parents describing the camp (oriented to parents' concerns)
 3. Posters advertising camp to be placed in schools, recreation centers, etc.
 4. Oral presentation to the class by a "camp representative" who visits schools to interest and sign up campers. Supply the rep with a speech, visual aids, sign-up forms, etc.
2. "First Aid for Summer"
 - a. Research the best way to deal with the following common summertime health problems:
 1. Sunburn and other sun-related ailments
 2. Inhaled water (near-drowning)
 3. Snakebite
 4. Insect bites
 5. Poison ivy and poison oak
 - b. Design an educational package including:
 1. Posters showing how to identify and deal with each problem
 2. Oral presentation and demonstration to the class of problems and solutions, with narration and visual aids (this will involve more than 1 student); choose 2 problems in consultation with the teacher.
3. "Get Rich in 9 Short Weeks"
 - a. Brainstorm as many possible ways to earn money as you can, other than "getting a job."

- b. Organize a job corps. Select a name, a financial goal, and a purpose for raising the money. Decide who your customers are. Write an explanation of how your organization works — describe your organization, how you assign workers, how you collect money, etc.
- c. Design a promotional package including:
1. Posters for public display in supermarkets, churches, parks, etc.
 2. Classified ads (a series might be effective)
 3. Letter to neighbors announcing services
 4. Oral presentation to the class of effective ways to talk with a prospective client (this will involve 2 students)
4. "Where Are We Going?"
- a. Pretend your group is the offspring of one set of parents. Plan a vacation for your family to a spot not more than 500 miles away. You have a budget equal to \$100 for each family member. Select a spot that appeals to all family members. Consider what each person likes to do or is willing to compromise in doing.
 - b. Plan the route. Choose both a direct and a scenic route. Estimate how long the trip will take, where you will stop for meals or overnight accommodations. Figure out the approximate cost of gas for the trip in your choice of family car and how much food at a fast-food restaurant will cost for each meal you have while on the road. Don't forget you are going on a round trip.
 - c. Considering how much money you have after travel expenses, decide how long you can stay at your destination, what you will do, where you will eat, where you will sleep, and what souvenirs of the area you might bring back.
 - d. Prepare a persuasive campaign to convince your parents to go, including:
 1. Map with routes marked
 2. Itinerary
 3. Budget
 4. Appropriate travel brochures
 - e. Oral presentation of campaign (one student will present the argument to two others, "parents," who will respond)

After choosing a project, each group elects a manager. The manager is responsible for organizing and leading the group — for making sure the others each have appropriate assignments and that all the elements of the project are ready before the project due date. Some groups choose the most popular member as manager, but most realize that they need a "boss" and

45
opt for someone organized, studious, or brassy. Some groups go through two or three managers.

The key to involving each group member enthusiastically in the project is the group contract, a written plan of action in which each person agrees to assume certain responsibilities and meet certain deadlines. These responsibilities may be as general as "will research snakebite" or as specific as "will bring three magic markers." The easiest format to use for the contract is a simple ruled sheet with columns headed "Activity," "Person Responsible," "Date Due," "Date Completed," and "Manager's Initials." The students take the contract more seriously if it is dittoed off than if they have to make their own from notebook paper — ditto looks more "businesslike." It is to each student's advantage to make sure that every responsibility he or she assumes is recorded on the contract, as the contract is used in assigning grades. As students compete to see their names written more and more often on the contract, they tend to think of more and more elements in their project in which they can show off their talents, so that camp reps usually are provided with not only a speech but also with T-shirts, pitched pup tents, and even TV commercials.

Needless to say, many facets of these projects call for knowledge or skills that many students have not been exposed to or mastered. The teacher remedies these deficiencies by holding a series of short "seminars" during the unit and by providing hand-outs that detail the steps in creating certain materials.

"Seminars" cover generalized information of use to all the groups. The units of material are short, usually needing only ten to twenty minutes of class time, leaving the rest of the period for group work. The teacher may lecture, demonstrate, show a film, or whatever seems appropriate to the material. While topics may be appropriate for consideration by the entire class, the teacher may wish to encourage the students to practice decision-making by choosing to "attend" only those seminars that they feel are applicable to their project. Some possible topics include:

- Making a Group Decision
- Managing Time and Staying on Task
- Persuading Others
- Speaking Before a Group
- Making and Using Visual Aids
- Recognizing and Using Advertising Appeals
- Creating a Brochure
- Creating a Poster
- Writing a Business Letter
- Using Classified Advertising
- Reading a Map
- Making a Budget
- Making a Portfolio

Information on these topics is readily available in beginning texts on speech, marketing, and group dynamics; and local printers and newspapers

will often have brochures on their services that include helpful information. Motivated students might even research and present seminar topics, although the teacher may have to supplement their efforts.

No matter who presents the seminars, a packet of complete instructions on how to do every part of each project should be made available to be used during the class period. Preparing such packets sounds like a bigger chore than it is: most of the projects share the same objectives, so that a sheet of instructions on using visual aids or making posters or whatever can be placed in the packets of groups doing different projects. Often, the teacher's seminar notes plus a diagram are all that's needed, though copies of posters that show good design and copy elements, maps with route markings, and brochures of varying styles and purposes are also helpful. To save paper, the teacher need make up only as many packets as the maximum number of groups in any class period and then require that each group return the packet at the end of the period.

Competition among groups working on similar projects will be fierce, especially among groups doing the camp project. Students rummage through the shelves where we keep projects-in-progress, looking for ideas from other classes. Spies are even assigned, students who ostensibly daydream or sleep or sharpen a lot of pencils while in reality listening to a nearby group's strategy. When oral presentations begin, the groups who go last have obviously benefited from watching the mistakes and successes of those who go first. The groups who have a little more time invariably have more "extra's" — a pickled rattlesnake for the first aid group, T-shirts with camp logos silk-screened at the local mall for the summer camp group, actual reservations at expensive resorts for the surrogate family.

The presentations are an exciting end to the school year. Since students can't actually do summer until school lets out, planning and talking about doing it is the next best thing. The truth about semicolons is not going to finally dawn on a boy with his mind on the sand at Panama City Beach, but if he's encouraged to think and write and promote the beach, he may see that there is a use to which English might possibly be put.