

# TEXAS VOICES

A NEWSLETTER OF THE TEXAS COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

## President's corner

By Eva Goins, President

### Dreaming Boldly: Highlights from the NCTE annual business meeting

The recent NCTE annual business meeting, in Denver, CO, opened by honoring the past and quickly turned its gaze toward the future. Through moments of remembrance, leadership calls, and forward-thinking reports, the meeting reinforced a clear message: the future of literacy education will be shaped by those willing to participate, advocate, and imagine boldly.

### Honoring Legacy and Community

The meeting began by recognizing past NCTE presidents and holding a moment of silence in memory of members who have passed such as Texas Legend Kyleene Beers. President Tonya B. Perry reflected, “We stand on the shoulders of giants, and we’re here because of all that the members before us have done. Let us not forget.”

### Leadership Nominations Are Open

The NCTE Nominations Committee announced that nominations are currently being accepted for several key positions, including vice president roles, representatives-at-large, and members of the Nominating Committee itself. Members were strongly encouraged to submit names and consider how leadership pipelines shape the future of the organization. These roles are vital to ensuring diverse voices and perspectives continue to guide literacy education at the national level.

### An NCTE Moment in History: The Orwell Award at 50

This year marks the 50th anniversary of NCTE’s George Orwell Award, which honors work that advances public discourse and language awareness. The historical reflection highlighted a notable shift over time. Earlier recipients focused on exposing deception and doublespeak, as more recent awardees emphasize storytelling as a powerful vehicle for truth.

### Presidential Report: Four Priorities for the Future

NCTE President Tonya B. Perry outlined four priorities guiding the organization’s work:

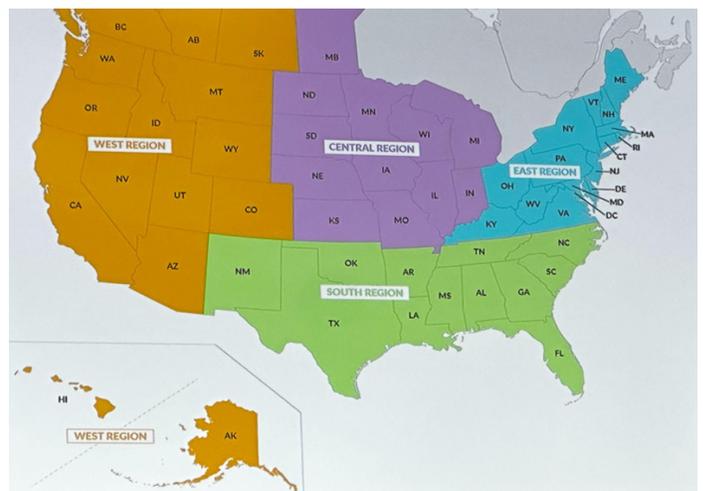
- preparing educators and students for an AI-informed profession,
- creating multiple pathways into the literacy profession,
- centering diverse voices, identities, and stories, and
- revising literacy standards to reflect the realities students face today.

### Executive Director Update

Executive Director Emily Kirkpatrick shared updates on NCTE’s advocacy efforts, new and upcoming publications, classroom-based

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## President's corner (continued)

teacher cohorts, research initiatives, and partnerships, including continued collaboration with the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. She emphasized NCTE's growing public presence and commitment to supporting educators with relevant, timely resources. She also announced that in partnership with the Committee on Affiliates, NCTE researched and has agreed to redesign how the regions of affiliates are determined. The new regional model was shown.

The meeting concluded with announcements of upcoming conferences, including the 2026 NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia, PA on November 19-22, 2026. The 2027 NCTE Annual Convention will take place in Chicago, IL on November 18-21, 2027. The NCTE + NCTM Joint Convention will take place August 3-5, 2026 in Charlotte, NC.

## Reflection: Practice rooted in community

By LaWanda Williams, Executive Secretary

"Texas, everyone is in red, and making me feel left out. You all are giving off *family reunion* vibes," commented Price (2025).

"I appreciate the energy from your affiliate," expressed Lathem-Ballard.

"Every time I see Texas, you're always together," voiced yet another affiliate.

Those comments, shared casually yet sincerely, prompted reflection on the final morning of the conference. They were able to capture the very heart of TCTELA, an organization grounded in collaboration, care and community.

The time spent in the affiliate meeting made me reflect on how we at TCTELA support one another. Board members model the support we hope teachers feel in the classroom. When a colleague experiences joy or challenges, we show genuine care through our responses—sometimes a text, phone call, hug or other simple response. Though not extravagant gestures, these simple acts speak volumes about who we are as an organization.

At TCTELA, our work extends beyond conference planning. Throughout the year, regular meetings keep us informed about organizational business and allow us to respond to emerging needs, ensuring aligned collaboration to support teachers and one another. This strengthens us as an organization while also reminding us that no one works alone.

TCTELA is more than an organization: it is a community, a family. We celebrate milestones, uplift one another during difficult seasons, and recognize that teaching is deeply human work. Because we care for one another beyond professional roles, our collaboration is stronger and our impact is greater.

What if organizations were measured by care instead of just productivity? In a profession where educators often feel overwhelmed or undervalued, belonging should not be optional. The human element is essential for an organization to be successful. Belonging and feeling part of a community should not be extra—it is essential.

Our work is easier because we collaborate and care about one another. No one has to feel alone in the work because care is the foundation of our leadership, which TCTELA displays proudly. We were not trying to look inseparable or show off in Denver—we simply were.

### Reference:

National Council of Teachers of English. (2025, November). Dream boldly: 2025 NCTE annual convention [Conference]. Denver, CO, United States. <https://convention.ncte.org>

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# No más silencio: The emotional toll of advocating for my Latino, neurodivergent son

By Esmeralda Cartagena Collazo- Teacher Development Chair



It took a global shutdown for me to see what had always been there.

When COVID-19 forced learning into our homes, I was no longer relying on teacher updates or report cards, I was witnessing it firsthand. My son, sitting quietly in front of a glowing screen, trying his best to engage, was drowning in a system built without him in mind. And I, sitting next to him, realized how invisible he had become.

His teachers were supposed to accommodate him in every class. Legally. Morally. Professionally. But they didn't. Every morning, I reminded them. Every day, they forgot. There were no visual supports. No slowed instructions. No consideration for his hearing needs. They were asked not to cover their mouths so he could read their lips, and still, they did. There was no patience for his processing, no attention to how his brain worked, and no regard for his identity as a Latino, neurodivergent, hard-of-hearing child.

Back in the classroom, it had been the same. Now I could finally see it clearly: my son, polite and observant, was being treated like a burden. His silence wasn't defiance, it was survival. And the more he was ignored, the more invisible he became.

So I did what too many parents are forced to do when the system pretends their children don't exist: I got an advocate. I filed a formal complaint with the Texas Education Agency. Not because I wanted a battle, but because no one else was fighting for him.

They didn't see my son. They saw labels. An accommodation list they skimmed once in August and never revisited. What they missed entirely was a child, one who loves to ask big questions, one who lights up when something finally makes sense, one who is deeply kind and endlessly curious. He is neurodivergent, yes. He is hard of hearing. He is Latino. And all of those things are part of what makes him extraordinary.

But in a classroom that calls itself "colorblind," his brown skin became a target. His needs were viewed as interruptions.

His differences were seen not as dimensions to understand, but as distractions to control. If he paused before answering, they assumed he wasn't paying attention. If he asked a question again, they saw him as defiant. They never once stopped to ask why.

What made it even harder was that I am an educator too. I know the system from both sides. I've been in the meetings. I've read the professional development slides. I've stood in front of students myself. And still, I had to beg for my son to be seen.

There were moments I'd sit in meetings or pass colleagues in the hallway and think, Why are you even here? Why do some people become teachers if they can't be bothered to care about children? Was it for the summer breaks? The Pinterest-worthy bulletin boards? The emotional high of calling themselves "heroes" on social media, only to treat actual kids like they're in the way? Is it the pension? The tote bags? The free coffee on Teacher Appreciation Week? Because loving children didn't seem to be part of their equation anymore.

And let me be very clear: if you are envisioning yourself teaching in a classroom where all the students look the same, speak the same, think the same, or look like you, *that's not public education. That's called homeschooling.* You don't need a degree for that. You can stay home. Our students, because they are different, because they look different, think differently, learn differently, deserve a *different* kind of teacher. A better one. One who chooses to see them.

I know this because I lived it. I watched what happens when the wrong people stand at the front of the room, when indifference replaces compassion. I've cried over this, alone, at night, after writing carefully worded emails that would no doubt be dismissed or ignored. I've walked into school buildings and seen people I once trusted look the other way. I've had to ask people I worked alongside, *Why did you fail my son? And how many others are you failing too?*

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## No más silencio: The emotional toll of advocating for my Latino, neurodivergent son (continued)

The hardest part of advocacy isn't the paperwork. It's the heartbreak of realizing how many people are willing to watch a child struggle if it means they don't have to change.

Silence is what they expect from us. Especially Latino parents. We're raised to be respectful. To defer to authority. To keep our voices low. Don't question the teacher. Don't stir the pot. Don't bring shame.

But I had to unlearn all of that. Because my son comes before every expectation of politeness. And if speaking up meant being labeled "difficult," so be it.

When I filed that complaint, things began to shift, but not without pressure. For days, then weeks, and eventually months, they called. They emailed. They asked to meet. They begged me to drop the investigation. They tried to convince me that things were being handled, that I was overreacting, that continuing would "damage relationships."

But I said **no**, over and over again.

Because this wasn't just about my son anymore. It was about every single student with a disability or unique need being failed across the district. Dropping the complaint would have been easier, yes. It would have preserved my peace, my connections, my reputation. But it would've cost those students their chance at justice. And I couldn't do that.

So I stood my ground. Alone, at times. But steady. And eventually, change came. My son started receiving the accommodations he had always been entitled to. Other students did too. And some teachers were removed from the classroom, not because I wanted punishment, but because they were not doing their job.

That wasn't retaliation. That was accountability.

It cost me, relationships, trust, peace of mind, but it gave my son something far more important: the chance to learn with dignity. The chance to be seen.

We're still healing. But there's more light in his eyes now. He's starting to believe in himself again. He smiles when he talks about school. He's beginning to understand that none of this was his fault, that his voice matters, even when others pretend not to hear it.

I continue to advocate. But now I also educate. I speak to teachers not just as a peer, but as a mother. I ask them to slow down. To look closer. To remember that behind every IEP, every silence, every so-called "behavior," is a child trying to survive.

My son is not broken. He is brilliant in ways the system doesn't measure. He speaks two languages, one of resilience, the other of resistance. He has taught me how to fight with grace and how to dream anyway.

To the educators reading this: your choices matter. Your assumptions matter. Your silence matters. Every time you ignore a child's needs or dismiss a parent's voice, you are making a decision about who gets to belong in your classroom. And every child is someone's whole world.

If this were your child, would silence still be acceptable?

Be the teacher you'd demand for your own child. Be the ally you would pray for if the roles were reversed. And when a mother like me shows up to speak, don't roll your eyes. Listen.

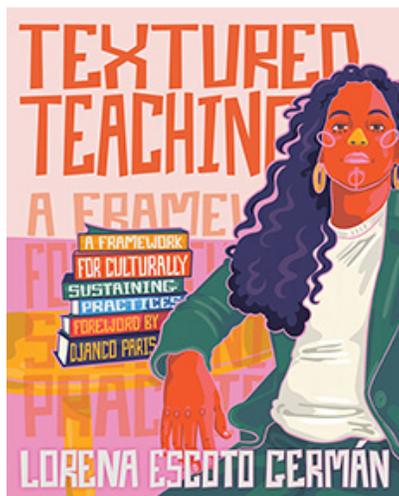
Because sometimes the only thing standing between a child and injustice is the parent who refuses to be quiet.

**No más silencio.**

## What do we do when our students' identities are challenged?

By Dr. Lois Barker, NCTE Liaison

Language, hair, and spirituality are all parts of our identities. Other significant components include race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. These parts of our students' identities have always been political. Outside of stringent laws and policies, books have always been a source of escape. They have allowed students whose sexuality and gender identity have been demonized to



connect to a world in which a character like them can thrive, be seen, and be loved. Books have given students the language to describe the racial microaggressions they face in school when adults tell them "they sound so articulate for a Black girl" or that when they are passionate about a topic, "they are too aggressive and intimidating."

It is important to note that attacks on students'

identities are not new. At various points in U.S. history, we can observe policies that define and determine what a marginalized person's identity should be. Many of these policies show up in our school systems.

In her book *Textured Teaching*, Lorena German (2021) argues that "in identifying the original purpose of schooling in the United States, Paris and Alim highlight how the function of education was to force upon communities of color a dehumanizing assimilation" (p. 13). Think about the presence of religious schools and residential boarding schools at the inception of this country. With the assistance of governmental policies, schools ensured that Indigenous children were forbidden from speaking their mother tongues, wearing their long hair and cultural attire, or practicing tribal spirituality and rituals. Similar policies targeted Hispanic and Latino students. Years after the Mexican-American War, around 1878, California rewrote the state's constitution in an effort to eradicate Mexican culture and fast-track assimilation. One change ignored Mexican-Americans' protected language rights by bringing forth an amendment stating that all official writings and state laws should be conducted, preserved, and published in English only. This forced thousands of Mexican-Americans to either learn English or be excluded entirely from the state's legal system.

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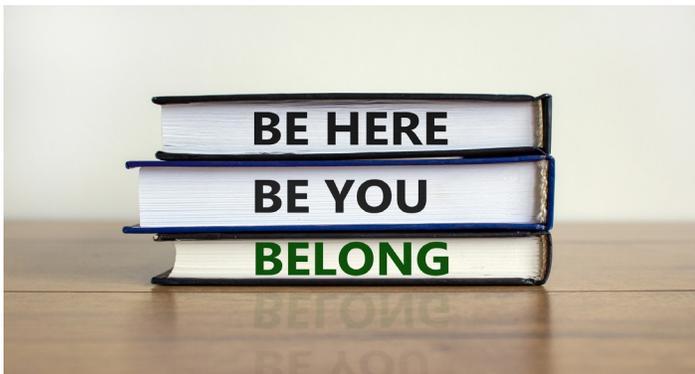
## What do we do when our students' identities are challenged? (continued)

Those laws have evolved. This evolution lives in book bans and censorship.

The escape—and, more importantly, empowerment—marginalized students found in books is once again threatened by stringent policies that target books exploring characters who are BIPOC or belong to the LGBTQIA+ community. Teachers face difficult choices as these policies conflict with their practice, their ability to create safe and inclusive spaces for all students, and a fundamental framework: that books serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 2015). When I facilitate professional learning or engage in individualized instructional coaching, teachers voice concerns about the difficult balancing act of upholding that foundational framework while maintaining their livelihoods.

At NCTE's annual conference this year, I attended a session facilitated by shea martin and Chanea Bond, recipient of NCTE's 2026 High School Teacher of Excellence Award. They shared stories of how teachers, particularly those in the South, struggle with this balancing act: Is teaching this diverse book—one that is most likely banned—the hill they should die on?

Chanea shared her story of teaching a work by Akwaeke Emezi, a coming-of-age novel that explores a character navigating their gender identity. Chanea recalls being called into her principal's office and questioned about this book. She provides the context for this principal, having previously given her the space to build an English department in which teachers work together to



ensure their classrooms are rich with diverse texts—not used as decoration or to complete a checklist, but to facilitate inquiry, activism, and empowerment—truly serving as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors while functioning as mentor texts for writing instruction and pieces to be examined via critical literary lenses—covering the TEKS rigorously, in other words.

During this inquiry, she explained to her principal that it was a coming-of-age novel. The principal proceeded to read an excerpt that explores gender identity—an excerpt that perhaps is what anti-LBGTQIA+ voices would use at a board meeting to claim students were being brainwashed and that the book should be banned despite its literary merit. The principal told her she could no longer teach this book—it was in violation.

Chanea then looked at us participants and asked what we would do at that moment. The room was silent. We have all, I am sure, practiced the grand telling-off in our cars on the drive into work for moments like this. Chanea was stunned. She had to inform her students and her counterparts that the novel study they had worked so hard to facilitate was no longer available.

But instead of sitting in despair, the culture of inclusivity she fostered showed. Her students continued to read the book independently, using social media to post about where they were reading it and their reflections. The students led the fight. It gave every teacher in the room a glimmer of hope: If you create student-centered spaces and give students the tools to amplify one another, to organize, and to rally for a cause, they will find a way to work through these policies that seek to erase and control.

shea then followed up on Chanea's experience with practical steps and examples of the work they were doing with teachers in the South. shea called them "Postcards of Possibility." Here are some of the postcards I found most relevant:

At one school, teachers had little curricular autonomy and administrative support. There was a heavy presence of groups dedicated to banning diverse books. shea helped teachers realize that no book is worth losing your job over—your presence in the classroom matters. They worked with teachers to bring person and community via texts. They used the well-known "Where I'm From" poem by George Ella Lyon to frame students' analysis of texts. Students used the popular STEAL method to address the question: How might this characterization reflect the characters' worldviews or society? Students were then invited to make connections (text-to-self, text-to-world) and reflect.

At another school, teachers were not allowed to talk about LGBTQ+ topics. shea worked with those teachers to create space to discuss relationships and community through the characters in the texts they had access to. shea highlights the importance of encouraging students to make connections between text, self, and world. They worked with teachers to emphasize personal narratives or creative prompts that provided students with space to grapple with the major themes and identities that emerged. It was during the sharing of this postcard that it dawned on me: We often overlook the relationships and experiences of people in other marginalized communities, even though their experiences of love and family are the same as those of any other group. When we get out of the way of our own blockers, much can happen when we pose the right questions, offer choice in product and reflection, and—most importantly—become facilitators as students grapple with the connections they make with texts.

After leaving their session, I was more hopeful, knowing that I just had to be a bit more creative when fighting blockers—these stringent policies. I left reflecting on the importance of knowing that my advocacy doesn't have to be loud: refusing to teach a book or taking to social media to call out various groups, not realizing the ripple effect it might have on those around me. My advocacy shows up in how I use books as vehicles for exploration and reflection. It is up to me to find community with like-minded individuals so that we can collaborate and support each other. My advocacy shows up in the T-shirts I wear or the stickers on my water bottle. My advocacy shows up in attending sessions on topics that some districts wouldn't fund and in bringing back those practices to educators who seek them.

shea wesley martin (they/them) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. Primarily interested in the (im)possibilities of schooling in the United States, their current research examines how race, gender, sexuality, and place impact the literacy practices of queer and trans youth of color. A nationally recognized educator

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# Nuestras historias cuentan—every single one

By Eva Goins, President

I have lived most of my life in the margins. Not by choice, but because I thought that was my place. That is where society said I belonged. At five years old in my kindergarten class, my teacher scolded me for speaking to my friends in my native language of Spanish. I didn't question nor did I even put up a fight, I just nodded, abided, and saved my Spanish speaking for home, family gatherings, or at Mass on Sundays. My parents told me to always respect my elders and that I needed to follow whatever my teachers told me to do. Again, I nodded, abided, and glued myself into the margins.

I think of how many of our students live among these same margins that I found myself tucked into. Perhaps you, too, have found yourself in those margins, quieted, unseen, or uncertain if your story mattered. I want to change that, or at the very least bring attention to it. I want to change the page settings and erase those margins where everyone can find themselves on the same page. Everyone's stories count, and when we stop to listen to each other's life experiences, it will only enhance us as human beings.

*Historias: Literacy Living Within Us* is the theme I chose for our 2025 annual conference and exposition. It is about stories that encapsulate all the literacies that live and breathe within us. It is about reading your favorite book with your dad before bedtime. It is about singing your favorite songs together on a roadtrip. It is about writing your very first love letter to that special someone.



It is about getting up in front of peers and speaking your truth. Literacy transcends beyond the four walls of our classrooms.

In January, when we gather at the beautiful Kalahari, I envision a huge story telling event. From our keynotes that will share their stories, to our presenters that will share their experiences, many stories will be shared. Come find me and tell me your truth; I want to know. I want every attendee to soak in every word that weekend, so they can take what they've learned or experienced back home to their students.

For me, education was the thing that dissolved the adhesive that kept me frozen on the outside. With knowledge and learning, I found myself leaving the margin. I have decided that even if society

will see me as marginalized because of my language, culture and heritage, it doesn't mean I have to view myself there. I will pick myself up and glue myself within the page, because mi historia cuenta. Just like yours does.

I hope you will bring your voice to our conference, ready to share your story and to listen and learn with an open heart. Together, we will fill the pages with the stories that make us who we are, and why we are educators. Registration is open, and I can't wait to greet you there!

Let's step out of the margins together and write ourselves boldly across the page of this conference, because nuestras historias cuentan—every single one.

## Secretary's Note

By LaWanda Williams, Executive Secretary

As we embark upon a new year, I want to take a moment to share information on our board's work and offer a few words of encouragement.

### Annual Financial Review Completed

In June, we completed our annual financial review, which we conducted in lieu of an audit. Like many organizations these past few years, we have faced some financial challenges, and this year's review revealed revenue is down. In addition to conference expenses, there are operational costs, publications, and website maintenance to mention a few. We are working diligently behind the scenes to make sure we are reviewing our expenditures and priorities and ensuring we continue to support teachers and students.

Though our road in public education is demanding, we are inspired as we plan our 2026 conference, *Historias: Literacy Living Within Us*. Our team is committed to creating a meaningful and enriching event while exploring ways to make

it cost-effective and impactful. Your voices play an essential role in shaping the experience. We are thankful to everyone who responded to opportunities to get involved.

### Inspiration as you continue

Now as we return to our classrooms after a much needed break, we understand and know that the upcoming months can be demanding. You are taking the time to continue fostering relationships, focusing on growth—not just academically, but emotionally and socially as well—and prepare for all the high stakes assessments your students will take. It can be heavy some days, but it is one of the most important things anyone can do.

Please remember that the work you are doing matters. Even on your tough days when you feel no one understands, someone in your classroom is calmed by your presence. You matter and you make a difference. Take care of yourself, support one another, and we are looking forward to seeing you at *Historias*.

# Guidance on Creating AI Policies for Your ELAR Classroom

By Lucinda Zamora-Wiley, High School Section Chair

Across the school year, we often find ourselves in search of resources and strategies to improve our practice.. However, if your district is anything like mine, we still haven't been given much (if any) direction on AI usage policies or recommendations for best practices of its use within our classrooms. This is true for most of us, as Texas remains one of twenty-four states in the U.S. without [state guidance](#) on AI usage for K-12 education (Kosta, 2025, "State AI Guidance")

As English teachers, we are the hardest hit by AI usage in our classrooms, especially at the secondary level, because students can now sit in front of a computer, input an AI prompt in under 30 seconds, and have AI generate any written assignment on



behalf of the student. Because most (if not all) English teachers have entered this profession with the hopes of teaching students how to think and write critically and to engage in writing with authentic purpose and intent in the real world, it can feel heartbreaking when our students opt out of the learning and growth opportunities we provide and allow AI to replace them. But we can't give up the good fight just because AI is here to stay. It behooves us all to pause, reflect deeply, and be extremely deliberate about how we intend or do NOT intend to use AI within our classrooms. Many districts across Texas have done their best to opt out of crafting AI policies out of concern for "getting it right" or wanting to see how AI plays out in our classrooms; however, this has created significant extra work (not to mention, ulcers!) for teachers who are left on their own to doggy-paddle in the deep ocean of trying to maneuver student AI usage without any support.

Here's some guidance that I hope will help you to dip your toes into the pond as you begin to head into a new school year with some AI policies in place for you classroom. May forethought and proactive planning bring you peace ahead of what is sure to be a busy year of:

1. Decide benefits of AI for your classroom...how and when will you be using it? Be strategic and deliberate in what you hope your students will accomplish with it. For instance, does your school subscribe to AI Adaptive Learning resources (resources

that offer personalized learning content to individual students based on their assessed instructional needs)? It should be safe to assume a bit of AI experience in most of our ELAR secondary students, but you may want to be prepared with a roll-out of a bit of AI Literacy to share with your students.

2. Decide what you will NOT consider acceptable usage of AI for your classroom. For instance, most ELAR teachers agree that AI should not be used to compose writing or act as a surrogate writer-thinker for the student. On the other hand, will you be one of those teachers who encourages students to use AI to assist with brainstorming, outlining, and/ or editing & revision of their written work?
3. Unauthorized use of AI and consequences: what will these be for your classroom? Are your policies abiding by your school and/ or school district's policies for "Academic Dishonesty?" Is there someone on campus or at your district that can peruse your Classroom AI Policy and offer some guidance—maybe even their approval?
4. This is most important: Do not reinvent the wheel when it comes to devising your own classroom or district AI usage polices...they've been done (and done well!) by a number of states, universities, and school districts, so feel free to research what's freely available on the Internet, and use this wisdom and guidance to craft your own. Yes, you might even consider asking AI to guide you to these AI policies (wink, wink).

## As for me and my classroom...

I teach Dual Enrollment Composition I, Composition II, and British Literature at my high school, so you can bet Generative AI usage has posed a problem for me and my students. Last year alone, I documented twenty-five incidents of unauthorized AI usage in my DE college courses, and it was exhausting having an individual writer's conference with every student to discuss my findings with them, to offer paper re-writes (by hand, using no digital resources) for partial credit, and reach out to parents and my university to report these issues as academic dishonesty. Full disclosure: this was soul-crushing for me, and I briefly dreamed of walking out of my English classroom and declaring early retirement right then and there. But then I reminded myself that I was creating my own pit of despair by NOT abiding by my own AI usage policies as stated in my course syllabi. I will not be making this mistake again. So after a year of teaching (that felt long and dark sometimes) with AI intrusion last year, this is what I'll be doing this year, and I'm sharing with you here just in case you may find my experience and personal classroom policies helpful. Please feel free to see what I'm adopting as my own AI/Academic Integrity Policies this school year (assuming I receive district approval, of course).

Please feel free to explore my sample of a solid AI policy. I took much inspiration from Warner Pacific University, and if you're wondering how I was able to find this incredibly helpful resource, this is entirely due to Lance Eaton's profoundly awesome work of collecting SAMPLE AI Policies from teachers, schools, and universities all over the globe! It's such a blessing that he is sharing this resource to anyone who's interested for

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## Guidance on Creating AI Policies for Your ELAR Classroom (continued)

FREE, so of course, I'm hyperlinking this brilliant, free resource for you below as well:

- [LZ Wiley AI Policy 2025](#)
- [Syllabi Polices for Generative AI - Repository](#) created by Lance Eaton

Gosh, I'm sure hoping that you aren't alone in your need to handle the creation of your AI policy for your classroom entirely on your own, but if like me, you are flying solo, please take a deep breath, and remind yourself that no matter how you decide to proceed (or not proceed) with AI in your classroom instruction, Lance Eaton can "fix your life." And whatever you do, remember: the work that you're doing with your students to teach them to write and think is irreplaceable and more important than ever, so

hunker down, and get ready to do the hard, miraculous work of teaching ELAR that you do every year, Lovelies! You've got this!

### References:

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## A review of Teaching Reading Across the Day: Methods and Structures for Engaging, Explicit Instruction

By Dr. Stephen Winton, *English in Texas* editorial staff

House Bill 3 (HB 3), passed by the 86th Texas Legislature (An Act Relating to Public School Finance and Public Education, 2019), required teacher candidates in grades Pre-K-6 to demonstrate proficiency in the Science of Teaching Reading (STR) through a certification exam (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Further, the bill mandated all K-3 teachers and principals attend professional development later termed HB 3 Reading Academies, which focus on STR (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). Thus, aligning instruction to STR is a concern for Texas educators. To better align a university-level methods course for preservice teachers to STR, my colleagues and I recently chose Jennifer Serravallo's (2024) *Teaching Reading Across the Day: Methods and Structures for Engaging, Explicit Instruction* as required reading.

STR focuses on phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Lubell, 2017). Serravallo (2024) offered lesson structures that support teaching phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Concerning phonics, Serravallo (2024) shared a lesson structure that includes introducing new concepts, spelling words/word work, reading words, writing connected text, and reading connected text. Her method combined explicit phonics and spelling instruction with student application in authentic reading experiences. As with all her lesson structures, she offered example lessons accompanied by video demonstrations of teaching. In my methods course, I created models by studying Serravallo's phonics lessons as mentor texts and writing a similar lesson. Students are then assigned to write their own phonics lesson using the lesson structure. I found Serravallo's work offered clear steps to teach phonics effectively.



Serravallo (2024) addressed fluency through her shared-reading lesson structure, which focused on the teacher modeling expressive reading and students reading together chorally. Serravallo noted that in shared reading lessons, students can see the text. The teacher supports students' fluency, including "accuracy, rate, phrasing, and prosody" (p. 190). The example videos of teaching fluency were especially useful, as they made visible the interactions between the teacher and students in shared reading. She also incorporated

elements of fluency in her reader's theater lesson structure. Students act character roles and "practice expressive reading... students are encouraged read and reread" to help build fluency (p. 252).

Serravallo's (2024) lesson structure for teaching vocabulary includes introducing and explaining a word, supporting deep processing of the word through application, and extending the learning by "exploring morphology or semantic/concept mapping" (p. 144). Her instructional focus for vocabulary is based in part on the Frayer Model (Frayer et al., 1969), including contextual information such as "synonyms, antonyms, characteristics, and context" (p. 139). She offered several extension activities, such as word webs, word matrixes, and vocabulary boards. Further, she shared various online tools for vocabulary lesson planning. I thought that while Serravallo's work on vocabulary might be familiar to veteran teachers, it nevertheless offered a robust and research-based lesson structure.

The bulk of Serravallo's (2024) text centered on comprehension, including the lesson structures of read-aloud lessons, focus lessons, close-reading lessons, and guided inquiry lessons. Particularly valuable for comprehension were focus

*Continued on next page.*

## A review of *Teaching Reading Across the Day: Methods and Structures for Engaging, Explicit Instruction* (continued)

lessons, consisting of teaching “a single strategy that is aligned to grade-level standards or curriculum” (p. 157) in whole group mini-lessons, small-group strategy lessons, or individual conferences. I appreciated Serravallo’s focus on comprehension, as I have noticed this aspect of STR sometimes receives less emphasis than phonics instruction in implementation.

Serravallo (2024) did not offer lesson structures that focus on phonological and phonemic awareness. Educators seeking to support this component of STR might supplement Serravallo’s work with other texts. For example, in our university’s course sequence, students previously learned about phonological and phonemic awareness in another course’s required reading of Bear et al.’s (2023) *Word Study for Phonics, Spelling, and Vocabulary Instruction: Formerly Words Their Way*.

Serravallo (2024) created a practical resource of lesson structures for phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Her succinct lesson plan examples can easily be added to existing lesson plan templates. By watching videos of her teaching, educators can reflect on instructional moves they wish to reinforce or refine in their teaching. I recommend Serravallo’s *Teaching Reading Across the Day: Methods and Structures for Engaging, Explicit Instruction* for educators who want to put STR into action.

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## A unified vision for writing instruction

By Doug Frank, Vice-President



Throughout the school year, many of us are searching for resources and strategies to support our students as writers. Recently in my district, we designed and released a series of Writing Playbooks, crafted for teachers and instructional leaders across all grade levels and content areas. These playbooks aim to clarify the foundational principles of effective writing instruction and align instructional practices across the district. While designed to support our district’s specific needs, the core principles of these playbooks can be applied in any Texas classroom. They are meant to help teachers think beyond just test preparation and focus on best practices with writing instruction. Our vision is that by implementing explicit writing instruction, integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening daily, modeling intentional choices writers make, and adjusting instruction to meet student needs, our students will grow in their literacy abilities and be more college and career-ready.

### A Common Thread: The Writing Instruction Continuum

One of the most powerful aspects of these playbooks is the “Writing Instruction Continuum” that is shared across the different grade-band resources. This framework outlines a clear and purposeful writing process, moving from “Understanding” to “Developing,” “Drafting,” “Revising,” “Editing,” and “Publishing”. This common language and structure can be impactful for vertical alignment and for students transitioning between grade levels.

- **Understanding** focuses on discourse opportunities, explicit instruction, and teacher modeling. This is where we lay the groundwork, allowing students to articulate their thinking and see the writing process in action. The emphasis on teacher modeling aligns with the work of Kelly Gallagher, who encourages teachers to write alongside their students.
- **Developing** moves into targeted practice and organizing ideas, using frequent discourse to refine thinking. The focus here is on crafting strong sentences and gathering evidence, echoing a key principle from Natalie Wexler’s work on the importance of sentence-level instruction.
- **Drafting** incorporates consistent writing time and conferencing, a practice championed by Penny Kittle. The playbooks also emphasize using exemplars to model good writing during instruction.
- **Revising, Editing, and Publishing** complete the continuum, with a focus on peer-to-peer and student-to-self reflection, targeted grammar instruction, and using rubrics to inform future instruction.

*Continued on next page.*



## From books to brilliance: The central role of picture books in emergent literacy (continued)

### Dialogic Read-Alouds: Making Authors Visible and Accessible

Maria's focus on Dialogic Read-Alouds takes the picture book experience beyond simple story consumption and transforms it into an interactive meaning-making event. A particularly powerful practice Maria highlighted was including photographs of authors alongside their books. This seemingly simple addition carries significant pedagogical weight.

When students see pictures of the authors, two important things happen. First, they can see themselves as writers. Representation matters, and when children encounter authors who look like them, the identity of "writer" becomes more accessible and attainable. Second, students begin to understand that books don't magically appear on bookshelves. There are real people behind these texts—people who make deliberate choices, revise their work, and bring their unique perspectives to the page.

Maria challenges us to TALK during read-alouds: think-aloud, ask open-ended questions, listen and give feedback, and keep the conversation going. While think-alouds, asking questions, and listening are often discussed at length, 'keeping the conversation going' might be new to some. Maria addressed multimodal literacy, acknowledging that contemporary picture books offer rich opportunities to explore how images, design, and text work together to create meaning. This multimodal awareness prepares students for complex texts they'll encounter throughout their literacy lives.

### Patterns of Wonder: Teaching Conventions Through Engagement

Rooted in her text, *Patterns of Wonder: Inviting Emergent Writers to Play with the Conventions of Language*, Whitney's framework addresses a critical challenge in early literacy instruction: how to teach language conventions in ways that are both developmentally appropriate and genuinely engaging for young learners. This portion of the session rested on a foundational principle: "A large slice of working with emergent writers and readers is living in a state of acknowledgement, celebration, and invitation."

Rather than drilling conventions in isolation or waiting until students are "ready" for formal instruction, Whitney urges the use of picture books as the foundation for teaching conventions. When students encounter conventions like punctuation, capitalization, dialogue, and sentence structure within the context of compelling stories, these elements become meaningful tools for communication rather than arbitrary rules to memorize.

The developmental appropriateness of this approach lies in its responsiveness to where students are in their literacy journey. Teachers utilizing this approach acknowledge what students are already doing as writers, celebrate their approximations

and growth, and invite them to try new conventions as they become ready. A student who is beginning to use spaces between words receives acknowledgement of that achievement and an invitation to notice how authors use punctuation. A student who is experimenting with exclamation points might be invited to explore how picture books decide when to use them for maximum effect.

By grounding conventions instruction in picture books and maintaining a stance of acknowledgement, celebration, wonder, and invitation, *Patterns of Wonder* helps teachers navigate the delicate balance between honoring developmental readiness and maintaining high expectations for all learners.

### Conclusion: Picture Books as the Foundation of Emergent Literacy

The three pillars presented at this NCTE session—Writer's Playshop, Dialogic Read-Alouds, and *Patterns of Wonder*—share a powerful foundation. They all position picture books as central rather than supplementary to literacy instruction. They recognize that emergent readers and writers need rich models of language, authentic purposes for reading and writing, and supportive environments where approximation is valued as part of the learning process.

For educators, several key implications emerge from this work. First, the selection of picture books matters enormously. Teachers need access to diverse, high-quality texts that represent varied perspectives, genres, and styles. Second, how teachers use picture books matters just as much as which books they choose. Read-alouds must be interactive, responsive, and purposeful, whether teachers are facilitating storytelling play, engaging in dialogic conversation, or exploring writing conventions. Third, teachers benefit from frameworks that help them use picture books strategically across different dimensions of literacy development.

Picture books are not merely tools for entertainment or simple time fillers. They are sophisticated texts that support multiple dimensions of literacy development simultaneously. When teachers approach picture books with intentionality, they create literacy environments where students develop not only skills but also identities as readers and writers.

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# Who we are as educators: The impact of teacher identity and teaching styles on student outcomes

By Janeth Cornejo, Middle School Section Chair



As I stood at the entrance of my middle school classroom on the first day of school, my heart raced with a mixture of excitement and dread. I was a first-year English Language Arts teacher, a Latina stepping into a role I hadn't even considered and feeling utterly unprepared for. With no formal training in education and only a passion for reading to guide me, I was about to embark on a journey filled with uncertainty and self-discovery.

## Walking into the Unknown

Coming from a single-parent household in a low-income neighborhood, I had often felt like an outsider in the world around me. My love for reading had always been my refuge, a means of escape that transported me to worlds beyond my own. However, as I entered the teaching profession, I struggled with feelings of inadequacy. Imposter syndrome crept in, whispering doubts in my ear: "What do you know about teaching? How can you inspire students?"

In an attempt to find my footing, I looked to the veteran teachers around me, hoping to replicate their success. I watched them skillfully manage their classrooms, deliver engaging lessons, and connect effortlessly with their students. I tried to mimic their teaching styles, believing that if I could just copy their methods, I would be able to create the same magic in my classroom.

## The Challenge of Imitation

However, the reality was far more complicated. I quickly discovered that what worked for them was a disaster with my students. These middle schoolers saw right through me. I found myself standing at the front of the room, attempting to project authority while feeling like a child playing dress-up in an adult's shoes. My lessons often fell flat—I was learning about inferring and context clues right along with the students! I struggled to engage them, which made me feel like a D-list actress—unable to connect with students even though many came from backgrounds similar to mine. The more I tried to imitate others, the more lost I felt.

One day, while attempting to enact a strict classroom management technique I had seen, I realized I was stifling the very creativity and enthusiasm I had hoped to nurture. My students, especially those who shared my Latinx heritage, were not responding to my attempts at discipline; instead, they seemed disengaged and unmotivated and honestly, unimpressed.

## Finding My Voice

It was at that moment of frustration that I began to reflect on my own identity and experiences. I remembered the oral stories

that had shaped my childhood—tales of resilience, love, food, and the power of community. I realized that my strength as a teacher lay not in mimicking others but in embracing who I was. I started to weave my narrative into my lessons, sharing my love for literature and the stories that had impacted me. I even began to fill my classroom shelves with my worn books that had carried me through middle school.

As I invited my students into discussions about the characters and themes that resonated with us, I saw their eyes light up. I began to incorporate texts that reflected their experiences and cultures, fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom. We explored stories written by authors who looked like us, authors who had similar experiences, stories that spoke to our shared struggles and triumphs. This shift transformed my classroom environment, creating a space where we could all connect through our narratives.

## The Power of Teacher Identity

Embracing my identity as a Latina educator not only empowered me but also had a profound impact on my students. I watched as they began to open up, sharing their own stories and perspectives. They felt seen and heard, and this connection fueled their engagement and academic progress. I realized that my identity was not a barrier but a bridge that connected me to my students.

This realization became a turning point in my journey: the best teaching comes from authenticity. I began to create lessons that highlighted our shared experiences, encouraging students to not only read but also to write their own stories. This approach fostered a classroom culture of trust and collaboration, where students were excited to share their thoughts and ideas.

## The Journey Continues

Reflecting on my first year, I understand that the path of an educator is not linear. It is filled with challenges and triumphs, moments of doubt and breakthroughs. As I continue to grow in my current role as a literacy coach, I remain committed to embracing my identity and sharing my love for literature with the novice teachers that I mentor.

In doing so, I hope to inspire them to recognize their own potential and the power of their stories. As educators, we must cultivate our authentic selves and create spaces where our students feel empowered to thrive. Together, we can shape a future where every student sees themselves reflected in their teachers, and where their voices are celebrated and valued.

# Blending ELA and art to center student dreaming

By Eva Goins, President

For any given time slot at NCTE, there are over a hundred sessions that you can choose from. It takes hours to read through the descriptions to choose the one session that you will commit to attending.

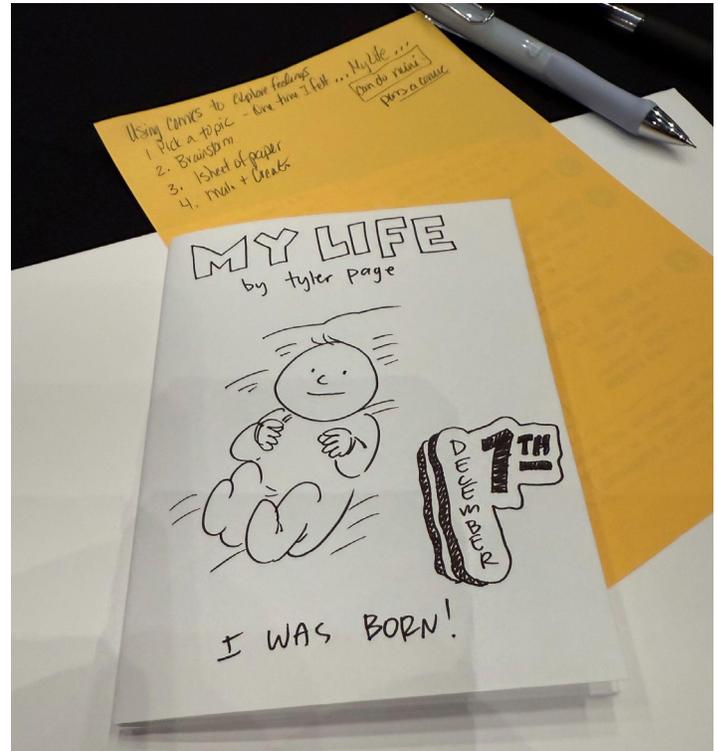
For two years in a row, The Middle Level session about blending ELA and Art has called to me. I leave this session inspired and ready to try techniques with my students. I take away from this session the importance of bringing in creative avenues into my classroom to amplify student voices and teach them that they are creators and have their truth to tell. It just may look a little different than an essay.

The roundtable sessions allow you to rotate through two presenters during the allotted time. I chose the Toy Hack and Graphic Novel presentations this year.

Sitting among attendees that are equally intrigued, surrounded by hacksaws, glue guns and mountains of toys, we all wait with anticipation for the presentation to begin. Inspired by *Toy Story*'s character Sid, attendees are encouraged to hack different toys together to create new toys with new stories. Metaphorically this task is brilliant in engaging your students to flip the narrative in how they see characters in which they are using to write about. It allows them to see how stories don't have to be what they have always been, but they can be different, new and innovative. After all hacks and glue have been applied, groups of attendees gather together to share the narrative of the new found creations. The task is challenging and creative. It is an activity I can't wait to use with my students.

Portable Tattoo, Suave Bunny, Two-Face, Hops, and Fidet-saurus plan their pal-trip to get matching tattoos.

The second roundtable session I attended was telling a story using comics hosted by author Tyler Page. He showed us how to create a comic book out of a sheet of paper and engage our students to tell their story. Students can start by telling the story of their life. Page also focused on the likelihood that not all students are able to draw, but that the images they create are exactly what is needed to tell the student's story. He passed around an example that he created to give us an idea of how to start with our students.



Whether it be manually creating new characters while hacking toys together, or encouraging the artistic side of your students, allowing them to have the creative opportunities to share their stories is impactful. I can't wait to have my students partake in these activities in my class.

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Portable Tattoo, Suave Bunny, Two-Face, Hops, and Fidet-saurus plan their pal-trip to get matching tattoos.

# Engaging with primary sources

By LaWanda Williams, Executive Secretary

Attending the 2025 NCTE Annual Convention in Denver provided educators with meaningful opportunities to collaborate and explore how primary sources can enhance classroom instruction. The session reminded educators that literacy lives in more than just books. Teachers stepped into the student role as they explored the Library of Congress (LOC) and its extensive collection of primary source instructional documents.

Primary sources include original documents, photographs, maps, artifacts, and other materials connected to a specific time period. The Library of Congress offers a wealth of primary source collections that provide students with first-hand accounts and historical artifacts. The library provides resources that naturally invite inquiry, encouraging students to ask questions, engage in discussion, and deepen understanding. Students build background knowledge, encounter multiple perspectives, and develop historical thinking skills. Primary sources are particularly beneficial for struggling readers, students with limited prior knowledge, and language learners because images and contextual elements can provide greater access than traditional texts alone.

Literacy is also strengthened through skills such as visual analysis, allowing students to demonstrate comprehension by examining images, captions, and details. According to the Library of Congress, “Primary sources expose students to multiple perspectives on significant issues of the past and present.” Students analyze images and captions, make comparisons, annotate texts, and expand vocabulary by applying strategies such as context clues and examining how language evolves over time—from historical language terms to modern language such as AI. Primary sources promote close reading, as students must attend carefully to details.

Writing instruction is also enhanced through the use of primary sources. Students may write diary entries, informational pieces, or argumentative texts based on historical events and documents. Using evidence from primary sources strengthens students’ ability

to support claims and develop clear, evidence-based writing.

Incorporating primary resources from the Library of Congress provides authentic learning experiences that strengthen background knowledge, inquiry, vocabulary, reading, and writing skills. Hayden comments:

With its unparalleled collections, services, events and products, the Library is forging significant and enduring bonds with people in communities across America, whether they visit us in Washington, D.C.,

or find us from their classrooms, local libraries, community centers or living rooms.

Most importantly, these resources drive curiosity and engagement in the

classroom. This NCTE session highlighted the power of primary sources and the Library of Congress in creating meaningful and impactful literacy instruction.

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# Finding joy in the stacks: Mychal Threets on libraries, literacy, and love

By Markesha Tisby, President Elect

At this year's NCTE convention, Mychal Threets reminded a packed theater of educators why we do what we do. In conversation with Stella Villalba, Threets didn't just talk about libraries. He celebrated them, embodied them, and invited us all to rediscover the joy they hold.

I'll admit it: sitting just a few feet from the stage, I had a complete fan girl moment. And I wasn't alone.

The session opened with pure delight: the entire audience singing the *Reading Rainbow* theme song together. It was a moment that captured everything Threets believes about libraries and literacy. They belong to everyone, they create community, and they should spark joy.

Threets traced his own "library joy" back to the people and even the pets who shaped his relationship with reading. His mother showed him that libraries were spaces of welcome and wonder. He read aloud every night to his cat, a ritual that deepened his love of books and storytelling. When a compassionate librarian organized a pet parade so his cat could visit the library, it was more than a kind gesture. It was an affirmation that libraries make room for what matters to us, even the seemingly small things.

Perhaps the most poignant thread in Threets' story was his Grammy's library card, which he now carries in his wallet. For most of her life, it was illegal for her to have one. That she obtained a card before she passed away represents not just personal triumph, but a powerful reminder of how recently

libraries were denied to so many. Threets' decision to keep it close is both an act of love and a commitment to the principle he repeated throughout the session: libraries are for everyone.

Threets was also remarkably open about his mental health journey, modeling the kind of vulnerability that helps break down stigma and invites others into honest conversation. In sharing his own struggles, he demonstrated that library joy isn't about toxic positivity. It's about creating spaces where people can be fully human, fully themselves.

For educators working to cultivate literacy joy in our students, Threets offers a clear path forward: make reading

personal, make libraries welcoming, and never underestimate the power of small acts of inclusion. Whether it's a pet parade, a family story, or simply believing that every person deserves access to books, these are the moments that transform libraries from buildings into beacons.

Those eager to bring Threets' message into their classrooms and libraries will soon have a new resource: his first picture book, *I'm So Happy You're Here: A Celebration of Library Joy*, releases on February 3, 2026.

## References:

Threets, M., & Villalba, S. (2025, November 20-23). *Saturday General Session: Mychal Threets* [Conference Session]. National Council of Teachers of English, Denver, CO. United States



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# Reading Areas, Not Reading Goals: A 2026 Book List for English Teachers: *Rethinking how we approach our own reading lives*

By Dr. Lois Barker, NCTE Liaison



Every January, we set the same goals: fifty-two books for the year, one each week. We make detailed spreadsheets, join Goodreads challenges, and feel the usual pressure. But by March, life gets in the way. Grading piles up, lesson planning takes over our evenings, and that reading goal starts to feel like just another task on a long to-do list.

What if we approached our reading differently this year?

Instead of strict number-based goals, I suggest focusing on reading areas. Think of them as places to explore, not boxes to check off. This way, we respect our busy lives as teachers and stay connected to books that support, challenge, and inspire us.

At NCTE 2025, I met many educators who asked the same question: How do we keep up with reading when life is so busy? How do we stay up-to-date with diverse books without making reading feel like work? I realized the answer isn't to read more, but to read more intentionally in areas that matter to us both at work and in our personal lives.

Here is my 2026 book list, organized by reading areas instead of deadlines. These are spaces I hope to explore throughout the year, whenever I have the time and interest.

## Reading Area: Reclaiming Heritage and Exploring Legacy

*Kuleana: A Story of Family, Land, and Legacy in Old Hawai'i* by Sara Kehaulani Goo is an essential addition to our understanding of Indigenous land rights and cultural preservation. Award-winning journalist Goo traces her family's fight to retain ancestral Hawaiian land granted by King Kamehameha III in 1848. Through personal narrative woven with investigative journalism, she examines the systemic displacement of Native Hawaiians while exploring the profound Hawaiian concept of *kuleana*—responsibility, privilege, and stewardship bound together.

[Find it here](#)

## Reading Area: Exploring the World of Graphic Novels

*Feeding Ghosts: A Graphic Memoir* by Tessa Hulls won the Pulitzer Prize for Memoir for good reason. This powerful book follows three generations of Chinese women through war, revolution, and displacement. Hulls explores her relationship with

her mother and grandmother, uncovering silence and inherited trauma from the Sino-Japanese War and Maoist China. The visual storytelling adds meaning that words alone can't provide. It's the kind of book that helps students see how form and content work together, and it's also a great example of research, memory, and narrative structure.

[Find it here](#)

*America Redux: Visual Stories from Our Dynamic History* by Ariel Aberg-Riger offers a fresh way to teach U.S. history. Using collaged photos, maps, documents, and handwritten notes, Aberg-Riger shares 21 visual stories that question the myths we believe. This Kirkus Prize Winner links struggles across time, from celebrity influence on immigration to the lasting effects of housing discrimination. It's the kind of book that encourages students to think critically about all historical stories.

[Find it here](#)

## Reading Area: Professional Learning

*Unboxing the Curriculum: Personalize the Program, Center Your Students, and Teach with Agency* by Kate and Maggie Roberts is coming soon. I'm looking forward to it after attending Maggie's session at NCTE in Denver. This book gives practical advice for teaching with or around a scripted curriculum. For updates, visit [kateandmaggie.com](http://kateandmaggie.com) or Heinemann.

*Nourishing Caregiver Collaborations: Elevating Home Experiences and Classroom Practices for Collective Care* by Nawal Qarooni offers a new perspective on family engagement. Instead of asking what families can do for schools, Qarooni focuses on how schools can value what families already bring to their children's literacy. The book is grounded in holistic teaching and collective care and provides practical tools for listening to, honoring, and building on family strengths. It's a must-read for anyone interested in culturally sustaining teaching. I attended a session with Nawal, and her stories and ideas closely aligned with my own beliefs. I'm eager to learn more, both as a coach and as a parent involved in my children's schools.

[Find it here](#)

*Text and Tech: Reading All Ways in K-8* by Kristin Ziemke supports a "YES, AND" approach: YES to print books and traditional reading, AND to digital texts and new ways of storytelling. In today's digital world, this balance is essential. Ziemke explains that providing students with both traditional and digital resources helps them become more independent and flexible readers.

[Find it here](#)

## Reading Area: Exploring U.S. and Caribbean Histories

*Voices of a People's History of the United States in the 21st Century: Documents of Hope and Resistance*, edited by Anthony Arnove and Haley Pessin, brings together over 100 primary-source texts from today's social movements. Contributors include Angela Y. Davis, Nick Estes, Colin Kaepernick, Mariame Kaba, and others whose voices are important for students to hear. These

*Continued on next page.*

## Reading Areas, Not Reading Goals: A 2026 Book List for English Teachers: *Rethinking how we approach our own reading lives* (continued)

texts remind us and our students that everyday people shape history through resistance and action. I began reading this book with an EduColor book club, and I plan to continue reading it through 2026.

[Find it here](#)

### Reading Area: Memoirs

*Book of Lives: A Memoir of Sorts* by Margaret Atwood is already a New York Times bestseller and Notable Book of the Year. Atwood shares stories from her unusual childhood with scientifically minded parents in the forests of northern Quebec, connecting key moments to the books that have shaped literature. From the tough school year that inspired *Cat's Eye* to 1980s Berlin, where she started *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood shows how life and art are closely linked, using her usual humor and wit. I added this book to my 2026 list after hearing her interview. Some clips even went viral on social media—IYKYK.

[Find it here](#)

### Reading Area: Horror

*After the People Lights Have Gone Off* by Stephen Graham Jones won the This Is Horror Award and was nominated for the Shirley Jackson and Bram Stoker Awards. This collection of fifteen stories looks at both supernatural and everyday horrors with sharp, lyrical writing. Jones is a leading voice in horror and Indigenous literature, and his stories stay with you long after you finish them. Two years ago, I read his book *The Only Good Indians* and was fascinated by the connections between Native American and Caribbean beliefs. It made me want to read more of his work and explore other Indigenous and African horror writers.

[Find it here](#)

### Reading Area: Young Adult Fiction

*Sisters in the Wind* by Angeline Boulley is a New York Times bestseller with seven starred reviews. From the author of *Firekeeper's Daughter*, this thriller follows Lucy Smith, who has been hiding from the foster system for five years after her father's death. When a lawyer offers to reconnect her with her Ojibwe family and heritage, Lucy must decide whether she can trust him, even as someone dangerous pursues her. Boulley examines the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), identity and belonging, and problems in the foster care system, using the same firm voice as in her earlier books.

[Find it here](#)

*The Scammer* by Tiffany D. Jackson is another psychological thriller inspired by real events, this time the Sarah Lawrence cult scandal. When college freshman Jordyn's roommate's brother moves in after being released from prison, his charm starts to control the young women in troubling ways. Jackson explores manipulation, identity, grief, and vulnerability, giving teens (and adults) a realistic look at how predators take advantage of people looking for connection. I love reading Tiffany's books, and her plot twists always surprise me. Seeing her at NCTE was a highlight.

[Find it here](#)

### Reading Area: Diverse Picture Books

*Origin* by Nat Cardozo is a unique book with beautiful wood-burning illustrations. It shows portraits of Indigenous children

and communities from over 20 groups on all five continents. Each spread blends people and their environment, using first-person stories to highlight community and connection to the land. Cardozo reminds us that Indigenous peoples steward 80 percent of the world's land biodiversity and were among the first conservationists. This book helps students and teachers see our relationship with nature in a new way.

[Find it here](#)

The best part of organizing reading by areas instead of goals is that there's no failure—just exploration. Some months, I focus on professional learning for workshops. Other times, I turn to horror stories or memoirs. The areas are always there, waiting for me. What areas interest you? What do you want to explore? Maybe you need books on trauma-informed teaching, poetry that reminds you why you love language, or graphic novels to use in class. Make your own reading areas, as broad or specific as you like.

The goal isn't to read every book on this list, though that would be great. The real goal is to stay curious, engaged, and connected to the books that support us in our challenging and rewarding work as teachers. When we read with purpose in areas that matter to us, we show our students what it means to be lifelong learners. We teach them that reading isn't just a checklist—it's a way of living.

Here's to a year of exploring, discovering, and enjoying books that challenge, inspire, and change us. I hope your 2026 reading is full, flexible, and truly rewarding.

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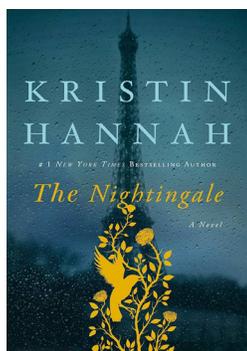
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# An educator's journey through reading and finding community

By Donna Herrera, Recording Secretary

It was through Abydos Learning that I rediscovered my passion for ludic reading and writing. We often forget as teachers that we too need to relax, unwind, understand that we will always have work pending, and we must prioritize our passions as well.

It was also through the connections in the Abydos conference and those in TCTELA that I also found strong friendships that would also get me excited to start book clubs and get excited about reading professional development books or books with no strings attached to our work. This is what led me to seek out book clubs in South Texas and to start a book club with my fellow TCTELA friends. Books allow us to feel and process emotions, memories, or anxieties. We are submersed in the battles of our favorite heroes, or we also fall madly in love in the whimsical romances that keep us turning each page.



This summer I was able to read *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah with my fellow ladies from the Better Than Therapy bookclub in South Texas. Through this new found book club, I was able to read a book I didn't think I'd like. I was hesitant at the genre, but I found myself so moved by the story I really just couldn't put it down. I found

myself overcome with emotion and also feeling like I wanted to tell my sisters and every friend that I love them so much, and that I value them. It was a book beautifully written with character development that was rich in characterization and historical references that showed the women behind war, sisterhood, survival, resilience—the many faces of heroism. It is the stories of others that encourage us to share or reimagine our own.

We may not have time to physically read a book and that's when audiobooks are life savers. But even if you aren't able to pick up books among friends, I challenge my fellow educators to instead host a writing party, share a poem structure, or ask your friends to bring in poems that spoke to them. Simply take the time from our busy schedules and share for the love of reading, writing, and a reading community as adults. Teachers should play and remix poems with friends or create poems composed solely of song titles. Our poem samples should not only be created as exemplars in a PLC room or in our classrooms, but they also should be workshopped and allowed to light every corner of our minds with our friends.

Books move us. They change us. They make us who we are. They also make us feel seen. This is the gift of literacy we all want our students to experience, and it starts with us taking the risk to meet strangers or gather friends for a book club to connect and ignite a fire that we would want to share with our students.

from the blogosphere...

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# Celebrate your story! How embracing your story shapes the work you do

By Alissa Crabtree, TCTELA Past-President



We were sitting in a conference room—surrounded by data, highlighters, and leftover Halloween candy—as I worked with a school leadership team during a mid-year reflection. Each department had been digging into the progress of their PLC work, celebrating wins and identifying the next steps.

When it was the math department’s turn to share, the department chair leaned back in his chair and said something that made the entire room pause.

He said, “Our impact feels different this year. Stronger. More meaningful. And I think it’s because we finally started naming the success criteria for our kids. We’ve always known how we wanted our students to show their learning, but now that we’re saying it out loud, everything has changed.”

He went on to explain that naming the success criteria wasn’t new. They had done it casually before. But this year, they were naming them purposefully. Explicitly. Consistently.

And in doing so, students had clarity. Teachers had clarity. The team had clarity. I felt that comment like a tap on the shoulder. Because he was right. Naming something changes it.

- When we use clear language to define what we want students to know, they learn with intention.
- When we use clear language to define what we expect, relationships strengthen.
- When we use clear language to define a goal, action follows.

So it made me wonder...

- What would happen if we, as educators, named something else just as important?
- What would happen if we named who we are and what shaped us as teachers?
- What if we put a name on our story?

Because our story influences everything we do, whether we name it or not, it shapes the way we greet students at the door. It shapes the patience we offer, or the boundaries we hold. It shapes how we design learning, how we respond to struggle, and how we view potential. And when we understand our story, when we honor it and name the meaning behind it, we teach with intention instead of instinct.

Naming success criteria helps students learn.

Naming your story helps you teach.

## The Power of Naming Your Story

Naming your story doesn’t just clarify where you’ve been. It clarifies why you teach the way you do. There is strength in giving language to the experiences that shaped you. There is clarity in naming the values that guide your classroom decisions. There is purpose in identifying the lessons your life has already taught you.

When you name your story:

- You understand your empathy more deeply
- You recognize your triggers more clearly
- You see your strengths with more accuracy
- You connect to students with more humanity
- You make instructional choices with more intention
- Naming something doesn’t just define it. It illuminates it.

## Five Steps to Uncovering and Sharing Your Story

Here are five intentional steps educators can take to reflect on their story and bring it meaningfully into their daily practice.

### 1. Start With One Defining Moment

Choose one moment from your own learning journey or personal life that changed the way you see education. It might be something small or something significant.

Ask:

- What happened?
- What did it teach me about learners?
- How does it still influence me?

This is the beginning of your educator identity.

### 2. Look for the Thread

Most defining moments reveal a theme: Perseverance. Belonging. Curiosity. Advocacy. Hope.

Ask:

- What value was shaped through this experience?
- How does that value show up in my instruction or relationships?

This thread becomes the through-line of your story.

### 3. Name the Meaning

This is where clarity emerges. Give your story a name, a phrase, or a value that captures its heart.

For example:

- “I teach for connection.”
- “My story is about resilience.”
- “I believe in second chances because I was given one.”

Naming the meaning turns a memory into a mission.

*Continued on next page.*

## Celebrate your story! How embracing your story shapes the work you do (continued)

### 4. Share It With Purpose

You don't have to share every detail. You just need to share the piece that offers insight, reassurance, or connection.

Use your story to:

- model vulnerability
- encourage perseverance
- normalize struggle
- build trust
- create belonging

The right story at the right time can rewrite a student's self-belief.

### 5. Let Your Story Guide Your Practice

Understanding your story provides direction when decisions feel unclear or overwhelming. If your story taught you the

importance of belonging, create classroom structures that help students feel seen. If your story taught you perseverance, design opportunities for productive struggle. If your story taught you the power of a safe adult, be that steady presence for students who need it most.

Your story becomes your compass.

Your classroom becomes its expression.

### Your Story Is Your Teaching Superpower

When educators name their story, they don't just gain insight. They gain intention. We stop teaching on autopilot, reacting from old patterns, carrying our gifts quietly. Instead, we step into the classroom with clarity about who we are, what shaped us, and how our story can help students write theirs. Because in the same way that naming success criteria empowers learners, naming your own success story empowers you.

Celebrate your story. Honor it. Name it. Because when you do, your teaching becomes more grounded, more human, and more transformative than ever before.

# Encouraging emergent writers to share their stories: 3 essential tips

By Markesha Tisby, President Elect

Every child has a story to tell. For emergent writers, the challenge lies not in the lack of stories, but in finding meaningful ways to translate their rich inner worlds onto paper. As literacy educators, we hold the key to unlocking these narratives and helping young learners discover the joy of written expression.

## Understanding Emergent Writers

Emergent writers are students in the earliest stages of their writing journey, typically including pre-K through elementary learners who are developing foundation literacy skills. These young authors are characterized by their growing understanding that print carries meaning, their experimentation with letter-like forms and invented spelling, and their natural desire to communicate through written symbols. While their technical skills are still developing, emergent writers possess vivid imaginations and authentic experiences that serve as the foundation for compelling storytelling. Literacy experts, Whitney La Rocca and Jeff Anderson, remind us that “no matter where writers are in their development—they are writers” (La Rocca, W. & Anderson, J., 2022, p. 21).

### Tip 1: Tap Into Shared Experiences as Writing Topics

One of the most effective ways to support emergent writers is to ground their stories in familiar, shared experiences. These

common touchstones provide a rich foundation for storytelling while ensuring that all students can participate meaningfully in the writing process.

Consider drawing from experiences that resonate across your classroom community: a recent field trip to the local fire station, the excitement of a surprise visitor, seasonal celebrations, or even simple daily routines like lunch in the cafeteria or recess on the playground. When students write about experiences they've shared with their peers, they have built-in conversation partners who can help them remember details, sequence events, and elaborate on their ideas.

These shared experiences also create natural opportunities for students to compare perspectives,

notice different details, and understand that the same event can be told in multiple ways. A field trip to the zoo might inspire one student to write about the playful monkeys. At the same time, another focuses on the massive elephants, demonstrating that every writer brings their unique lens to shared experiences.

### Tip 2: Use Oral Rehearsal for Topic Development

Before emergent writers put pencil to paper, they need time to organize their thoughts and develop their ideas through spoken language. Oral rehearsal serves as a crucial bridge between thinking and writing, allowing students to practice their stories,

*Continued on next page.*

## Encouraging emergent writers to share their stories: 3 essential tips (continued)

receive feedback, and refine their narratives before trying to produce them in written form.

Create regular opportunities for students to share their stories aloud with partners, small groups, or the whole class. During oral rehearsal sessions, encourage listeners to ask questions to help the storyteller elaborate: “What happened next?” “How did that make you feel?” “Can you tell us more about what you say?” These conversations help emergent writers develop their ideas more fully and consider their audience’s needs.

Oral rehearsal also allows teachers to assess students’ story development and provide targeted support before the writing begins. You might notice that a student has difficulty sequencing events or needs help adding descriptive details. By addressing these challenges during the oral phase, you can prevent frustration and set students up for writing success.

### Tip 3: Choose Appropriate Forms of Writing

The final tip involves selecting writing formats that match your students’ developmental needs while still honoring their role as authors. Two particularly effective approaches for emergent writers are shared writing and interactive writing, both of which provide scaffolding while maintaining student ownership of their stories.

#### Shared Writing

In shared writing, the teacher acts as the scribe while students contribute ideas, language, and decision-making. This approach allows emergent writers to focus on the thinking work of composition without being hindered by the physical and cognitive demands of encoding. Students can concentrate on crafting their stories, choosing precise words, and making authorial decisions while the teacher handles the mechanics of getting words on paper.

During shared writing sessions, think about writing decisions, model how writers solve problems, and demonstrate the connections between spoken and written language. Students see their oral stories transformed into written text, making the abstract process of writing more concrete and accessible.

#### Interactive Writing

Interactive writing takes shared writing one step further by inviting students to “share the pen” with the teacher. This action “allows us to introduce children to the process of writing and all its intricacies in a safe, structured manner” (Halpern, 2023, p. 16). In this approach, students contribute not only ideas but also participate in the actual writing process. A student might come up to write a familiar letter, add a period, or write a word they know. This gradual release of responsibility helps emergent writers build confidence and develop their encoding skills within a supportive framework.

The key to successful interactive writing is knowing when to invite student participation and when to maintain the writing flow. Choose moments when students can contribute successfully, ensuring that the experience builds confidence rather than creates frustration.

#### The Art of Bookmaking

No matter how student writing has been produced, as a class, small group, or independently, the process can culminate in bookmaking. Creating books validates students’ work as real writing and provides a concrete product they can share with others. Simple bookmaking techniques such as folding paper into small books, adding illustrations, or creating class anthologies transform student writing into treasured keepsakes.

The bookmaking process also provides opportunities to discuss the parts of a book, the role of illustrations in storytelling, and the relationship between authors and readers. When students see their stories bound in book form, they begin to see themselves as legitimate authors whose stories matter.

#### Fostering a Community of Young Writers

Teaching emergent writers to share their stories requires patience, creativity, and a deep belief in every child’s capacity for meaningful expression. By grounding their writing in shared experience, providing time for oral rehearsal, and choosing developmentally appropriate writing formats, we create environments where young writers can flourish.

Remember that the goal is not perfection but progress. Celebrate the child who adds a single letter to represent an entire word, honor the student who draws detailed illustrations to support their text, and recognize the growth in the writer who begins to leave spaces between words. Each step forward represents a victory in the journey toward confident, capable authorship.

When we provide emergent writers with the tools, support, and encouragement they need to share their stories, we do more than teach writing skills. We help them discover their voice, validate their experiences, and understand the power of written communication. In doing so, we lay the foundation for a lifetime of meaningful literacy experiences and nurture the next generation of storytellers, authors, communicators, and literacy experts.

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## Call for submissions

Review the submission guidelines at [https://www.tctela.org/english\\_in\\_texas](https://www.tctela.org/english_in_texas).

**English in Texas, Vol. 56.1—Spring/Summer 2026**

**Theme: Cultivating Critical Hope: Fostering Transformative and Nourishing Practices in ELAR Education**

**Manuscript Deadline: April 1, 2026**

In a world where hope and action often find themselves at odds, we reflect on the words of Paulo Freire (1994): “The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism” (p. 2). Yet, as we navigate the complexities of our society and profession, we must also embrace the notion of critical hope. As Bishundat et al. (2018) articulate, critical hope allows us to assess our environment through a lens of equity and justice while envisioning a better future.

It is essential to differentiate critical hope from traditional concepts of hope, which often fail to incite the transformative change we desperately need. Traditional views can render hope a lofty, wishful notion, devoid of the necessary critique of inequities. Instead, we invite manuscripts that engage with the idea of hope as not merely an aspiration, but as a call to action—a praxis that intertwines reflection and action.

Critical hope serves as a conceptual meadow where diverse narratives converge, allowing for the coexistence of conflicting truths. This space fosters alternative possibilities and embraces complex pluralism, welcoming all learners to navigate their fragmented selves. As Grain (2022) beautifully puts it, critical hope offers permission to be both wounded and visionary, to feel anger while yearning for a better world.

For the Spring/Summer 2026 issue of English in Texas, we seek insightful and reflective contributions from educators, researchers, and practitioners that explore transformative practices in English language arts and reading (ELAR) education through the lens of critical hope. This theme emphasizes the importance of cultivating spaces that nourish critical thinking and foster resilience among students.

We encourage submissions that address the following questions:

- How do you define critical hope in your unique professional practice and context?
- How do you cultivate critical hope in your students to empower them as agents of change in their communities?
- In what ways can transformative practices in ELAR education support students’ socio-emotional development and academic success?
- How have you integrated critical hope into your teaching methodologies to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes?
- What role do culturally sustaining pedagogies play in fostering an environment of critical hope and transformation?

Additionally, you may consider broader inquiries such as:

- How do you celebrate and integrate students’ diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds into your curriculum?
- What innovative classroom practices are necessary for educators to nurture critical hope and resilience in their students?
- How can teacher development programs better prepare educators to implement transformative practices in their classrooms?

**FOCUS ON THE THEME:** We invite manuscripts that are conceptual, reflective, pedagogical, research-based, or theoretical as they relate to the theme of cultivating critical hope in ELAR education.

**INQUIRIES AND INNOVATIONS:** We also welcome educational research relevant to the work of ELAR educators, whether theme-dependent or generally applicable to the ELAR community.

### STANDING COLUMNS:

Brief contributions in the form of standing columns are encouraged. These can center on topics of interest that do not necessarily align with the issue’s theme.

- **Teaching on the Front Lines:** Texas ELAR teachers are facing unprecedented challenges to their professional judgment and students’ access to diverse texts. This column will share stories of navigating censorship in Texas schools, highlighting strategies for advocacy, collaboration, and text selection. We seek to empower educators to build resilient systems that ensure all Texas students can engage with a wide range of voices and stories.
- **Emerging Voices:** This column will highlight the vital inquiries of beginning Texas ELAR teachers (preservice or Inservice with 1-5 years of experience) as they navigate the early stages of their professional journeys. Inspired by the “Future Is Now” roundtable sessions at NCTE, we provide a platform for emerging scholars to share their questions, explorations, and insights.
- **Youth as Knowledge Generators:** This column will champion the power of youth as knowledge creators, challenging the traditional research paper and exploring how young people’s original research and creative scholarship can inform public policies and activism in Texas. We seek to publish accounts of innovative youth-led projects conducted in schools and communities across the state.

Submission Guidelines: For detailed manuscript submission guidelines, please scroll down to the Submission Guidelines section. For any questions, feel free to contact the editorial team at [englishintexas@twu.edu](mailto:englishintexas@twu.edu).

Send manuscripts and inquiries regarding publication to: TCTELA Headquarters/English in Texas • 919 Congress Avenue, Suite 1400 • Austin, Texas 78701 • 512.617.3200

Email: [englishintexas@twu.edu](mailto:englishintexas@twu.edu) (subject line: “English in Texas Submission or Query”)

We look forward to your contributions!

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