



A D V A N C E D P L A C E M E N T E N G L I S H

Literary Criticism

A Bug's Life

We've adapted another teacher's idea to fit our program. We don't do any criticism during the year. Our kids work throughout the year in teams we assign in August. After the AP exam, we assign each team one of the critical schools. We use the *Bedford Introduction to Lit* which, like the other anthologies, has a chapter on criticism. Each team has an approach to "study." The textbook has a good two-page explanation of the key ideas of each. We suggest they look at another source or two that will give them a fast overview—something like Wikipedia, not a scholarly study. We assign them at random and, as we often do, we leave the kids 120 seconds to swap with another team if they choose.

We stress that we are not "teaching them literary criticism" but just getting them familiar with some of the terminology they will run up against in college.

At the next class meeting (we meet every other day), we check to see that kids have notes of some kind while they watch "A Bug's Life." Any number of other movies would work, but we've found that animation removes the problem of whether the kids are focused on the characters or the actors, which we want to avoid. We also like that this movie has an uncomplicated story line. Another advantage is that our periods are 100 minutes and the movie runs something like 93. Students miss class often after the exam as they take other AP tests and the like. Kids who are out the day of the movie send someone to pick up the DVD, and they get together somewhere to watch it that night or the next. We offer the classroom and the school library, but they nearly always choose to go to someone's home.

The following class starts with time for the teams to talk about the movie through the lens (can you talk through a lens?) of their critical approach and to prepare a short presentation of about 7-10 minutes for the class. They are to explain the key ideas of their school of criticism and then apply it to the movie.

As with other presentations, they may not simply run an automated "presentation." They must present their findings facing the class with lots of 'eye contact.' They may use visuals to enhance their explanation, but they lose points for any visual with more than nine words.

They react pretty vigorously to each other's "readings" of the movie. One year the Marxists and the Feminists were starting to call each other names. We told them they were behaving like college professors and to cut it out.

We evaluate each team according to how well they present their "stuff."