

FIRST, A TERM

The game of school

The set of moves a student learns to get the grade without needing the learning. Everyone in this room played it. Most of us were good at it.

"Figure out what the teacher wants and give them that."

"Do the minimum that still gets the A."

"Memorize Thursday night. Gone by Monday."

"Is this graded?"

In a minute I'm going to ask you for one of yours. There's an index card at your seat.

WHILE YOU WAIT

On your index card, write one move you used to succeed at the game of school.

Be honest. Nobody's grading this. Drop it in the bowl up front.

Breaking the Cycle: Selling Project-Based Learning to Students & Teachers

Colin Dabkowski · Alden High School · WNYNET Fall Conference, October 9, 2026

Every one of these is a rational response.

THE NEXT 95 MINUTES

About 30 minutes of me. Then we'll make stuff.

10:11

Why we're here

10:21

Where you stand

10:24

Hopes & Worries

10:36

Three front ends

10:55

A student

11:05

Design yours

11:27

Worry Wall, close

THE PUBLIC PRODUCT

At 2:20 this afternoon, three to five of you will go to the front of Costello Hall and speak for this room.

I'm telling you now because that's the first thing I do with a unit these days. Watch what it does to how you work for the next hour and a half.

WHY

Two ideas of what school is for

The ladder

Unlock the next level, then the next, then the next. One skinny ladder with space only for yourself.

After twelve years of it, students take one of two options: refuse to play, or get addicted to the feeling of the next rung.

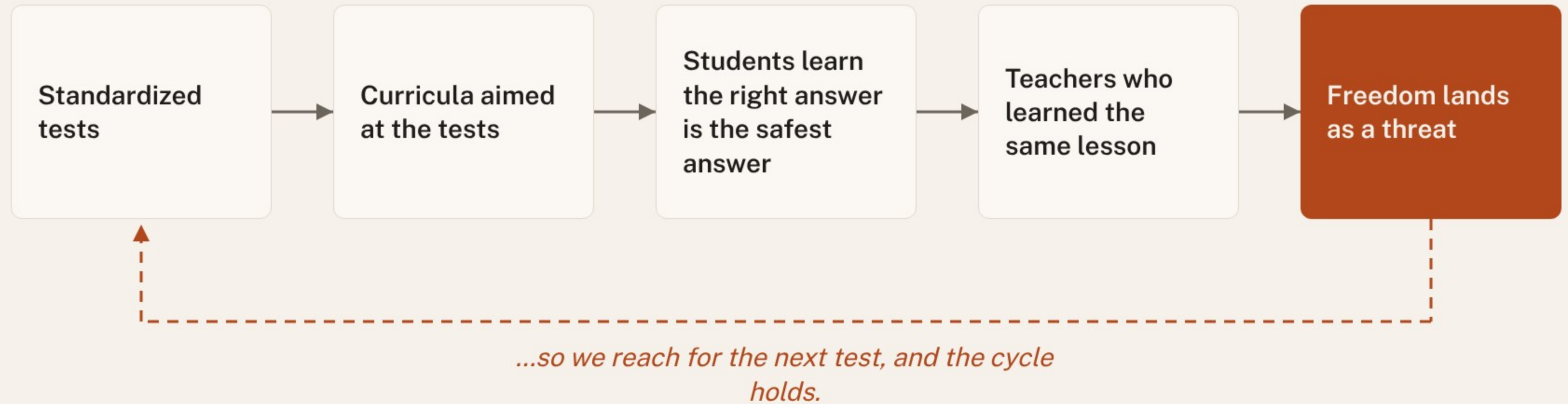
The multiplayer game

Points accrue not to the player but to the people and institutions around them.

The goal of education is for students to make change in their own communities right now, not after some unforeseen next level.

THE CYCLE

Why freedom lands as a threat



A CONFESSION

I had the project right and
the first week wrong.

Apparently you have to tell students why you're doing things?

Five moves before anyone makes anything

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | Say why, out loud, early, more than once. | They deserve to know what we're doing and why before they're asked to trust it. |
| 2 | Ask hopes and worries, then keep the answers. | Write them down. Post them. Go back to them. The return is the move. |
| 3 | Build the rules together. | Look at real work first. Let them say what's good. The rubric comes out of that. |
| 4 | Name the audience on day one. | A real reader with a face changes the work before any of it exists. |
| 5 | Expect it to break, and let them watch you fix it. | Anonymous feedback at midpoint. Change something because of it. Say so. |
-

"Given real freedom on day one, most of my students would thrive."

Strongly agree Strongly disagree

Pre-service teachers: answer for the students you just were. Remember where you're standing. We come back to this line at the end.

Worries, then hopes.

Hopes

I hope that I can enjoy this school year.
I hope the soccer team makes it to sectional finals.
I hope that I don't have to pay that much for
college. I hope I will be successful in life.
I hope the Bills win the Super Bowl. I ~~do~~ hope that I
pass English.

Two freewrites in the notebook, after the snack: what are you worried about, what are you hoping for. Anything counts. The Bills count.

22 seniors, 44 handwritten pages, transcribed that night so I could read them all before the next class.

The pages stay. We go back to them. That's the whole move.

If you gave students more control...

1 · HOPE

What do you hope happens?

For your students. For you. A moment, not a mission statement.

2 · WORRY

What are you afraid will happen?

Name the worry you'd be embarrassed to say out loud. That's the useful one.

One hope and one worry each.

- 1 Go around. Listen for the worry your table has in common.
- 2 Write your table's two biggest worries on sticky notes.
- 3 Put them on the Worry Wall. We come back to every one of them before 11:40.

FRONT END ONE · WACS, THE NEWSROOM THAT HAPPENS TO BE A CLASS

"This class is driven by you and your curiosity."

Teaching is journalism for a smaller audience. That line opens the class deck every September, and the whole year hangs on three questions:

1

What do you want
to make?

2

What story do you
want to tell?

3

How can I help you
accomplish your
vision?

Every story starts with six questions

1 What is my story about?

2 Why is it important to my audience?

3 Why is it important to me?

4 Who will I interview?

5 What b-roll do I need?

6 What help do I need?

A SOPHOMORE'S PITCH, FROM THE CLASS DECK

The story: an *Our Town* promo connecting the play's small-town theme to the way people in Alden actually live, while advertising show dates.

Why Alden: residents see the inner workings of the show and recognize values and themes many of them share.

Why me: "I've been in theater since third grade. As a sophomore I got a lead role. I've lived in Alden pretty much my whole life and know what small-town life here is like."

Interviews: the directors, castmates, a longtime resident. **B-roll:** rehearsals, the stage, the town. **Help:** a family connection to the *Alden Advertiser* for town history.

What makes that a good pitch?

Three things. Be ready to say one of them out loud.

In WACS this is a whole class period: small groups watch an alum's video, each led by a student who has already made one, and the class builds the criteria. Then the rubric. Then the project. The rubric is theirs.

WACS · WHERE IT BROKE

The same deck says both of these

THE CLASS DECK, FIRST WEEK

"This class is driven by you and your curiosity."

THE SAME DECK, A FEW PAGES ON

"This class is not an easy A."

Two hours a week outside class. A project every two weeks. Late: **-15, -25, -35.**

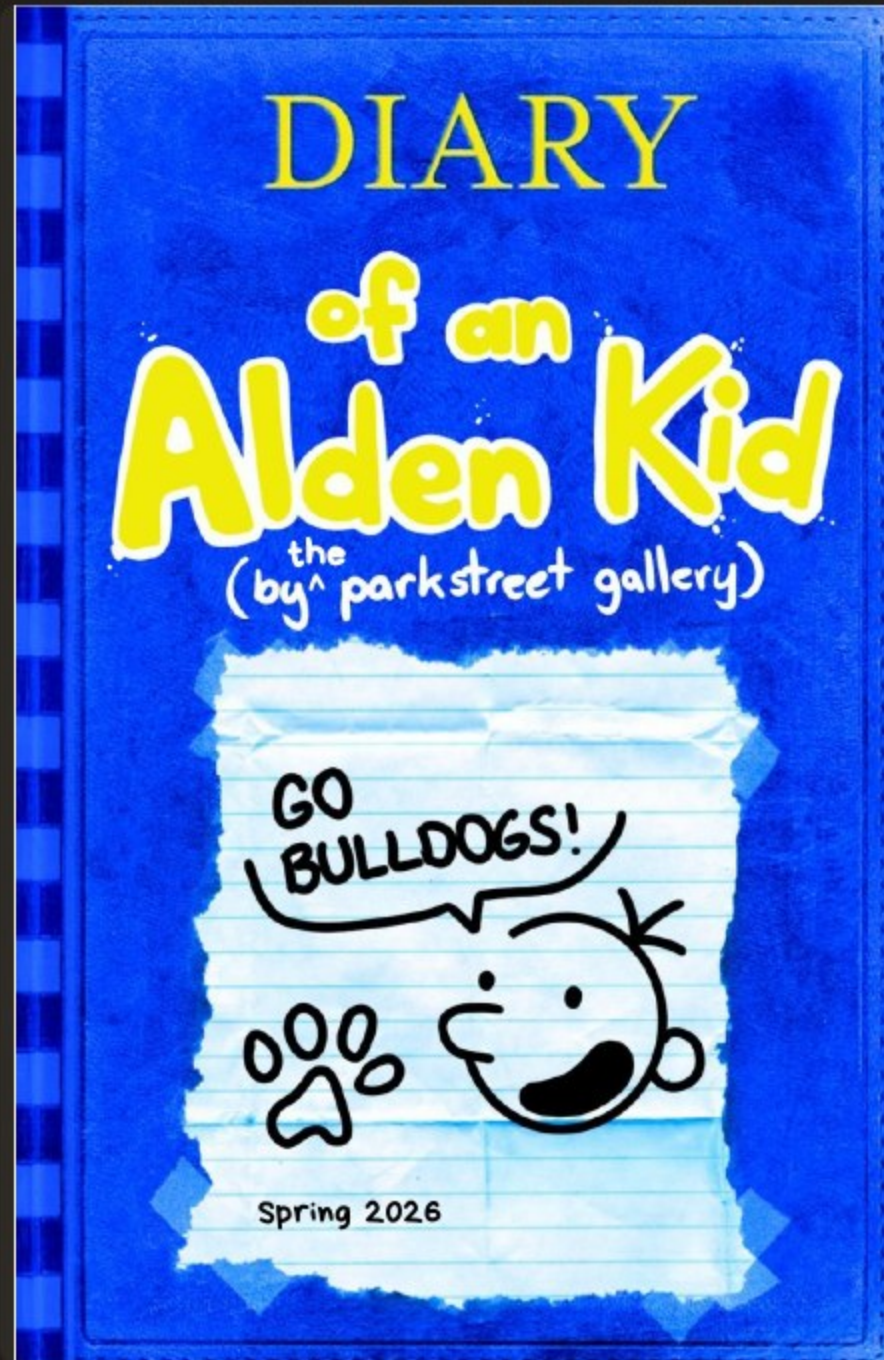
WHAT TOLD ME

The anonymous mid-semester feedback form, November and April, read aloud as a class. The game of school had come back in through the gradebook, and I was the one who let it in.

WHAT CHANGED

The rubric, built with them. A deadline-day checklist whose third item is "help your classmates." The feedback form as a fixed ritual, twice a year, every year.

The object they inherit



Introduction:

As the school year comes to an end, our creative writing class has the honor of presenting you, the reader, with the 4th edition of the Park Street Gallery. This magazine is unique, as it has been entirely created by students—the collecting of the pieces, the designing of the cover, the meticulous organization within. The main purpose of this presentation is to uplift those within the school district who crave an opportunity to show their work. It gives an incredible chance to show the Alden Community that Alden High School and Middle School are filled with creative minds. Not only is this a magazine we are proud to present, but it is a special collection of different presentations of art and writing that every artist and author should be proud of as well. Thank you to everyone who submitted a piece, as this magazine would not exist without you. Thank you as well to Ajax Perry for the creation of our wonderful cover. We are now proud to present to you Volume 4 of the Park Street Gallery!

—Catie Gabalski
Editor in Chief

Sixty pages. Poems, short stories, art. Concept, submissions form, editing, layout and the cover, all by the class.

"This magazine is unique, as it has been entirely created by students."

From the editor in chief's introduction, page 3

Next spring's class is handed this on day one and told it's theirs to make next. The audience exists before a word is written.

THE PARK STREET GALLERY · RELEASE DAY, JUNE 2026

The audience shows up



Printed copies on a picnic table outside the school. The staff hands them out. People read them on the spot.

This is what "name the audience on day one" is for. It isn't a rubric line. It's a day.

Next spring's class gets handed one of these on the first day.

The magazine students inherit

It exists. It has a name. Last year's staff made it. On day one this year's class is told it's theirs to make next. The audience was named before a word was written.

1

Browse real student lit mags. Say what you like.

2

"What kind of magazine should we make?"

3

Job openings posted. Applications by form.

4

Interviews for the top roles.

5

Team goals, stand-ups, a cross-team sync in front of the room.

6

A printed magazine with their names in it.

One student built the submissions form and walked the class through the numbers herself. That's move 4 doing move 3's work: the audience made the criteria real.

The day the applications came back, the class split.

Applicants went to the back room as the magazine team. Everyone else sat at the center table for a silent poetry workshop graded to a strict rubric. I still don't know whether that was a real alternative or a consolation prize.

AT YOUR TABLE

Same room, same kids, same magazine. What would you do with the students who didn't apply?

FRONT END THREE · INTRO TO ACTING, RIGHT NOW · SEPTEMBER 1

Before We Build This Class

"We are going to design this course together, so I'd rather start with what you want than with what I planned. Nothing here is graded, and nothing you mark is a promise."

2 · THE COMFORT DIAL · 1 TO 5

Reading a script out loud, sitting down

Improvising with no script at all

Performing for just the people in this room

Performing for an audience from outside the class

Being on camera

Being the one who runs the group

"Honest, not brave."

3 · WHERE THIS CLASS COULD GO · RANK THREE

Put on a real play for a real audience

Acting for the camera

Writing our own material and staging it

Speaking and presenting without freezing

Lights, sound, design, stage managing

Something I haven't thought of:

"Cross out anything you'd hate."

4 · HOW YOU TICK

When you're nervous, what actually helps, and what makes it worse?

You do better when you get: a plan first · thrown in · depends on the day

Anything I should know? *Including the one thing that would make you dread walking in here.*

"It fit my schedule" is a real answer.

INTRO TO ACTING · MR. DABKOWSKI

Before We Build This Class

TELL ME HOW YOU TICK

NAME [redacted] GOES BY [redacted] GRADE 12 DATE 9/1

We are going to design this course together, so I'd rather start with what you want than with what I planned. Nothing here is graded, and nothing you mark is a promise.

1 · WHERE YOU'RE STARTING FROM

☒ School play ☒ Musical ☒ Chorus or band ☐ Speech or debate ☐ Video / TikTok ☐ Improv or tabletop games

☐ Nothing at all, and that's fine ☐ Other: _____

What made you sign up? "It fit my schedule" is a real answer.

It fit my schedule

What do you want to be able to do in June that you can't do today?

I'm not sure

2 · THE COMFORT DIAL

Shade a box. 1 = rather not, 5 = let's go. Honest, not brave.

	1	2	3	4	5
Reading a script out loud, sitting down	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐
Getting up and moving while you say the lines	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐
Improvising with no script at all	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐
Performing for just the people in this room	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐
Performing for an audience from outside the class	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐
Being on camera	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐
Singing, even badly	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐
Being the one who runs the group	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐

3 · WHERE THIS CLASS COULD GO

Number your top three: 1, 2, 3. Cross out anything you'd hate.

☒ Put on a real play for a real audience ☒ Stage presence — how to hold a room

☐ Short scenes and one-acts, just for us ☒ Acting for the camera

☒ Improv and games all year ☒ Writing our own material and staging it

☒ Speaking and presenting without freezing ☒ Lights, sound, design, stage managing

☐ Something I haven't thought of: _____

4 · HOW YOU TICK

When you're nervous, what actually helps — and what makes it worse?

Putting me on the spot, I'm very indecisive

You do better when you get: ☐ A plan first ☐ Thrown in ☐ Depends on the day

Something you're good at that has nothing to do with acting:

Anything I should know? Including the one thing that would make you dread walking in here.

Performing in front of people, I don't like it, (people from school)

What made you sign up? "It fit my schedule." What do you want to be able to do in June? "I'm not sure."

The comfort dial: ones and twos down the column. When you're nervous: "putting me on the spot, I'm very indecisive." The one thing that would make you dread walking in here: "performing in front of people, I don't like it."

This student was placed in an acting class. The sheet told me on day one. Rule #1 and the job board exist because of answers like this one.



71 pages from the first day: WACS, College English 12, Acting. One scan, one folder, read before the second class.

INTRO TO ACTING · SEPTEMBER · WHERE IT BROKE

I asked what they wanted. Then I handed them *The Sandlot*.

Sept 3–10

Great Performances

Students pick the performances. The class builds "what makes a great one." Single lines from a hat.

Sept 17

Choices, again

The agenda says "try exercise again, simplified version." Then outside for tableaux. First tell.

Sept 21

The Sandlot watch-along

Big choice, small choice. "We'll be performing our own version of a scene as a class." My pick. My plan.

Sept 21–28

They weren't into it.

No agenda posts for a week. I stopped. I knew the game-of-school version: push through, grade the scene, call it a unit.

Sept 29

I asked again.

One question: what do you actually want to make? I typed every answer, by name, while they talked.

The sheet on day one asked the right question. I just didn't let the answers drive until the plan I'd brought in had failed in front of me.

INTRO TO ACTING · SEPTEMBER 21 · THE SHEET FROM THE DAY IT BROKE

A good lesson on a text I chose.

The Sandlot — Watch-Along Sheet

Noticing performer choices - Intro to Acting

Name: _____ Date: _____

We're not just watching a movie today — we're studying it like actors. Every performer on screen is making choices: how to stand, when to pause, how loud to react, when to hold back. Some choices are **big** and some are **small** — and both kinds are what make a scene funny, moving, or interesting to watch.

As you watch, catch as many choices as you can. We'll be performing our own version of a scene as a class, so pay attention to what you might want to try yourself.

BIG CHOICE

Bold and visible — a shout, a wild gesture, an exaggerated face or run. Easy to spot from the back row.

SMALL CHOICE

Subtle — a pause, a glance, a half-smile, a held breath. Easy to miss, but often what makes a moment feel real.

[illegible]

Before we perform our own version...

1. Which character's choices stood out to you the most? Why?

2. Describe one SMALL choice you noticed that had a big impact

3. Describe one BIG choice that made a scene work.

4. If you were playing one of these characters, what's one choice you'd want to try — and what moment would you want our class to bring to life?

Big choice, small choice. A table to catch them. Four questions at the bottom.

"We'll be performing our own version of a scene as a class, so pay attention to what you might want to try yourself."

The last question assumed the performance was happening. Nobody had asked them whether they wanted to perform *The Sandlot*. I had the comfort dial in a folder and didn't look at it.

Nothing wrong with the sheet. Everything wrong with who chose it.

"What do you actually want to make?"



Mentions. Most students named two or three ideas.

WHAT THE REASONS SAID

"Not everybody would have to act."

"Everybody could have a job they're comfortable with."

"We don't have to show the whole school."

The worry wall, spoken out loud. The ideas told me what to make. The reasons told me how to build it.

INTRO TO ACTING · OCTOBER 1 · "YOU TOLD US"

Two ideas won the room. So we're making both.

FILM COMPANY · THE SCARY MOVIE

A 3-to-5-minute scary short, shot on campus. Scary, not gory.

Director · Writer · Camera · Sound & Voice · Makeup, Costume & Props · Editor · Producer

Premiere: Friday, November 13. Right here, for us.

The camera loves small: stillness, eyes, a held breath.

STORY COMPANY · STORY TIME LIVE

Two or three original picture-book stories, narrated and acted out for a primary class.

Authors · Illustrators & Book Makers · Narrators · Actors & Puppeteers · Props & Set · Stage Manager · Participation Leader

Show day: Thursday, November 19, in their classroom.

Little kids love big: slow, clear, arms wide.

THE PICK

A private choice card: first choice, two jobs you'd want, what you're OK being. "Nothing on the card is a promise."

THE RULES

Each company writes three ground rules. Rule #1 is given: nobody gets pushed on camera or on stage. Anyone can act. Nobody has to.

THE LOG

Every class ends with a Production Log: one thing I'm excited about, one thing I'm nervous about. Hopes and worries, every day.

INTRO TO ACTING · THE CALENDAR THEY WERE HANDED ON OCTOBER 1

Pitch Day is today, while I'm standing here.

Oct 1

Launch. Pick your company.

Oct 9

Pitch Day.
Companies pitch to each other.

Oct 16

Table reads.

Oct 27–Nov 2

Shoot days.
Rehearsals.

Nov 6

Test audience day.

Nov 13

Premiere.
Friday the 13th.

Nov 19

Story Time Live.

Nov 23

Wrap and reflection.

MOVE 3, DONE THEIR WAY · THE PITCH BUILDER

Monday they watched three scary shorts like filmmakers and wrote **Rules of Our Horror**; the Story Company watched a read-aloud and wrote **What Little Kids Love**. Criteria first, from real work, before a premise exists.

Then three premises, a story spine, a scare map, and a four-part pitch short enough to say out loud.

"WHO DOES WHAT ON FRIDAY? TALKING IS ONLY ONE JOB."

Says our one-sentence pitch · reads the spine · shows the scare map · explains what we need · answers questions.

A job table on the last page, so the student who marked 1 on "performing for the people in this room" still has a job on Pitch Day.

Criteria first. Then premises. Then a job for everyone.

INTRO TO ACTING · FILM COMPANY · 1 OF 2

Pitch Day · Friday, Oct. 9

Pitch Builder

Monday you watched like filmmakers. Today your notes become a pitch.

Company name

Holding the pen

1 Rules of Our Horror

From your notes on Tuck Me In, Lights Out and Alma, what do good scary shorts do on purpose? Think about how fast the first scare comes, what we never see, what we hear, and where the camera sits.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

2 Three premises

One sentence each. Shot on campus. Scary, not gory. 3–5 minutes. Circle the one we're making.

A

B

C

3 Spine it

Run the premise you circled through the story spine. One sentence per line.

Once upon a time...

Every day...

Until one day...

Because of that...

Because of that...

Until finally...

And ever since then...

INTRO TO ACTING · FILM COMPANY · 2 OF 2

Pitch Day · Friday, Oct. 9

4 Scare map

Draw the tension line from the first shot to the last. Mark your three scares with an X and number them.

TERRIFIED

CALM

0:001:002:003:004:005:00

SCARE	WHAT WE SEE	WHAT WE HEAR
1		
2		
3		

5 The pitch (Friday)

Four parts. Keep each one short enough to say out loud.

What it is

One sentence.

Who's in it

Characters, and who might play them.

Why it'll work

Why will it scare an audience?

What we need

Places, props, people.

Who does what on Friday? Talking is only one job.

JOB IN THE PITCH	WHO
Says our one-sentence pitch	
Reads the spine	
Shows the scare map	
Explains what we need	
Answers questions	

1 • Rules of Our Horror. From three scary shorts they watched like filmmakers. Their criteria, before any premise.

2 • Three premises. Shot on campus. Scary, not gory. Circle one.

3 • Spine it. 4 • Scare map. 5 • The pitch, four parts, short enough to say out loud.

Who does what on Friday? Talking is only one job.

Five weeks from "what do you want to make?" to a one-sentence pitch. Some of those weeks felt like nothing.

Some of these students didn't choose this class. "You decide" is a harder sell when you didn't decide to be here.

I have not once been sure it would work.

That's not a bug in the approach. It's the cost of it, and I'd rather pay it than go back.

What the front end sounds like from the other side

"I am worried I'm not writing enough because everyone else is still writing and I am out of ideas."

A senior, first freewrite, day one of College English 12. The game of school in one sentence.

"Everybody could have a job they're comfortable with, whether it's acting, recording or editing. Not everybody would have to act."

Two students, Intro to Acting, September 29, the day I stopped and asked.

"I like the build-it-ourselves, start to finish. It would be funny if we recorded it and had bloopers and watched it together at the end."

Intro to Acting, September 29. The audience named by a student before I named one.

"I'm scared of being a teacher, too. What comforts me is knowing I'm not doing it for the money, but to feed my soul and inspire every child I teach."

A senior headed for music education, day one of College English 12. For the Buffalo State students in the room.

"I also hope that I pass English."

Same day, same class, last line of a hopes page.

TWO MINUTES

Stand. Stretch. Flip your handout over.

Back in your seat at 11:05. We start then whether or not everyone is back.

Pick a unit. One you teach, one you're planning, or one you sat through and wished was different.

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | The two sentences you'd say on day one. | To a sixteen-year-old, not an observer. Why this, why this way, why them. |
| 2 | The hopes-and-worries question, and what you'll do with the answers. | Where do they go? When do you go back to them? |
| 3 | What students look at before they make anything, and who leads that. | Real work, not a rubric. Who facilitates? |
| 4 | The public product, and an audience with a face. | Not "the class." Not "me." |
| 5 | Where it will break. | It will. Name the day. Name what you'll do about it. |

Read your day-one sentences aloud, exactly as you'd say them.

THE GAME OF SCHOOL TEST

Would a student who is winning the game of school still want to play this one?

What's the first question that student asks? "How many points?" "Is this graded?" "What do you want?" Answer it out loud, now.

THE AUDIENCE TEST

Does this audience actually exist, and can they actually receive the work?

Do your students care what they think, even a little?

Would the work change because the audience is real?

HARVEST

4 min

Who wrote a day-one sentence that surprised them?

Say it to this room the way you'd say it to the class.

Every worry up there goes in one of three columns

THE MOVES ANSWER IT

"They'll freeze." "They won't know what good looks like." "They'll ask me to just tell them."

Freezing is what day one looks like without the why and the hopes-and-worries. "What's good" is built with them before the product. "Just tell me" is answered by the audience, which tells them.

IT'S REALLY ABOUT GRADES, ADMIN, THE TEST

"How do I grade it?" "My principal wants scores." "The curriculum is fixed."

Real, and not going away. What could ride alongside? The mentor podcast lived inside a unit that ended in a research paper. Co-built rubrics are still rubrics.

IT NEVER GOES AWAY

"It'll take longer." "It'll be messy." "Some kids still won't buy in."

Yes. Five weeks to a pitch. The Park Street split is still an open question. The late penalties are still in the WACS deck. This job is imperfectible, and that is part of what makes it beautiful.

"Given real freedom on day one, most of my students would thrive."

Strongly agree Strongly disagree

Same statement, same line. Stand where you are now. Nobody has to explain.

BEFORE YOU GO

Tell the person next to you the first thing you're going to try.

Write it on the bottom of side two. That's the line you'll be glad you have on Monday.

THE PUBLIC PRODUCT · 2:20 IN COSTELLO HALL

Who will carry this room to the front? Three to five people who wrote something today they'd say out loud.

"What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves."

Paulo Freire

If we let our students and our community tell us what they need, we cannot possibly go wrong.

TAKE IT WITH YOU

Everything from today is on the WNYNET site

THE PACKET

This handout and these slides

Worries & Hopes · Before We Build This Class

The six-question pitch · the Deadline Day checklist

The Pitch Builders and the Story Spine

The Audience Menu and the Audience Test

COLIN DABKOWSKI

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Lunch is on your own at 11:45. See you at 2:20.