Wheel of Words – *Examining Structural Patterns in Literature:*
A Strategy for Analysis and Synthesis

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Introduction

Task III (Session Two, Part A) on New York State’s ELA Examination requires students to examine two pieces of literature, typically a poem and a narrative, and develop a critical essay based upon a collective controlling idea. The first step in this interpretative process requires students to analyze a literary text and draw thematic conclusions.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* recommends an “orderly arrangement of parts” that form a beautiful whole or “organism.” Intensive reading begins with students displaying sensitivity to textual words and all their denotative and connotative meanings. Literal definitions of words are often accompanied by deeper implications, both positive and negative, that can assist students in gaining greater understanding of the work.

Identifying words in a poem is merely the first step in structural analysis of a work, which examines patterns of word relations to the overall context and theme. Internal relationships between words, phrases, metaphors, symbols, myths, allusions, and images gradually reveal a form that develops to create the whole.
Step 1: Identifying the Strategy

Wheel of Words is a strategy designed to help students begin the analysis and synthesis processes involved in critical examination of literature. In Task III, this strategy should be applied independently to both literary pieces.

By extracting significant language and an overall subject from the short literary work, students actually are beginning a detailed analysis of the piece by moving line by line. This focused investigation provides students with a simple approach, rather than trying to initiate a large-scale analysis with overwhelming amounts of information. The thinksheet provides students with a graphic organizer that enables them to visualize patterns of among the words, and later interpret contextual or thematic meanings that may be attached to the word relations.

The wheel encourages students to select various word groups and phrases that may stand out during the readings. Related words should be placed together in a single word boxes at the end of a spoke. Students should determine an overall subject from the piece, which can be derived from their comprehensive impressions after the reading, and place that in the center because all of the word groups will connect to the subject.

When examining the language, a denotative or literal definition should be applied to each word box and the subject. Denotations of each word group or phrase should be listed in the first column, illustrating the widely accepted meaning attached to such language. Once all the boxes have been identified, students should then examine the connotative meaning of the word groups as they are related to and colored by the subject, and place these interpretations in the second column.

Finally, students will examine the meaningful patterns and internal relationships that have stemmed from the connotative column. Under the third column, students will determine the thematic implications of the language as they apply directly to the subject of the work. Students will then synthesize these various thematic meanings as they formulate their own interpretations of the literary piece. By using this approach to literary analysis, students now also have extracted textual evidence to assert and support their literary interpretations.

Step 2: Modeling the Strategy

The teacher will begin the modeling procedure by providing students with one short piece of literature, such as a poem. Students will have copies of the poem and the Wheel of Words Thinksheet. The teacher will open with a
discussion on the formalistic approach to critical analysis that examines the meaning of literature as found through the structure and language.

Since the literary passages should be read several times, two students will be asked to read the poem aloud to the class. Each student will apply his or her own intonation, pace, and volume to the reading.

The class will then read the poem silently and underline key words or phrases that stand out. The teacher will have students share some of the word groups that appear significant. During the fourth reading, students should begin to make notations regarding the language and paraphrase significant passages.

If a title is given, close attention should also be given to its meaning.

Students will then be instructed to place their selected words into related word groups in the boxes at the end of each spoke. The number of spokes of course will vary by the poem as well as the individual student. The class will collectively discuss what the possible subject could be, based upon these initial readings. The subject simply serves as an umbrella, which will shadow the thematic discussion that will arise.

Next, students can work as partners and begin to examine the denotative and connotative meanings that can be applied to each word box. Since interpretation is a subjective process, partners can cooperatively discuss the meanings that will be written in each column, yet their views do not have to match. In fact, more ideas should be expressed due to the collaboration. Once the denotative and connotative meanings are shared, students should apply the thematic implications of their findings in relation to the subject of the poem, which is the synthesis process.

As partners complete all three columns on the thinksheet, the class will reconvene for a group discussion and analysis of the poem. Selected word boxes will be examined to underscore the different meanings that may be applied to the same language. The class will begin to synthesize their findings as they scan down their third columns with thematic implications and begin to formalize their overall impressions of the poem.

**Step 3: Scaffolding the Strategy**

Since the Task III on the ELA Regents Exam requires students to examine two short pieces of literature, students will then begin to work on the second passage independently. Typically, the two passages will contain some similarities between subject and themes because students are required to write a critical essay, based upon a controlling idea, as their final product. The analysis that they employ using the Wheel of Words allows students to draw connections that will help them formulate their controlling ideas.
The scaffolding procedure will have students work on the second passage, following the indicated reading steps, highlighting, and extracting words. Once again, the students will move down to the three columns and begin to apply the various meanings of the selected words.

After all of the students have their individual thinksheets completed, the class will collectively discuss their findings. Working through this task independently allows students to expound on their personal views without being influenced by views and interpretations of others. The class discussion can help further develop budding ideas of each student.

Completing the Wheel of Words for each passage, students will now begin to synthesize their findings from both passages and determine how they are connected. Subject, themes, tone, or conflict may relate the passages, but they may foster similar or contrasting views. The class will discuss how the different ways these two literary works may be discussed in a cohesive and coherent argument.

Step 4: Providing Additional Practice

The additional practice will feature an assignment where students must then develop a formal controlling idea, better known as a thesis statement, that will provide a specific and focused guide for their essay. Students will be required to use their controlling idea and create an outline that will discuss the findings of each passage. The outline should include the textual evidence that was found through the Wheel of Words and any other viewpoints that fortify this discussion.

Conclusion

Analyzing literature is a basic strategy that can be applied to any genre and is not exclusive to the New York State ELA Exam. Wheel of Words is merely a preliminary strategy that can help students tackle a piece of literature that may seem overwhelming at first, particularly when looking at a literary work in a holistic manner. It should be noted that the formalistic approach to literature is simply one of many types of criticism that may be applied.

Suggestions for Adapting the Strategy in other Grades or Content Areas

Wheel of Words is a procedural tool that may assist students with literary analysis. This strategy can be used in any grade level and could be applied to social studies where students may be examining essays and speeches.

Thinksheet

Copies are attached.
Dream Deferred

*By Langston Hughes*

*Harlem*

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*
Thinksheet

Wheel of Words

Directions: Identify the significant words or phrases found in the poem and group the related in each box. Next, breakdown each group of words into their denotative and connotative meanings in order to determine thematic implications.

denotative values: provide the literal of core meanings of words
connotative values: give the associations that imply the emotional atmosphere of words, often expressing approval or disapproval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denotations</th>
<th>Connotations</th>
<th>Thematic Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>B.</td>
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<td>C.</td>
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<td>D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>E.</td>
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<td>F.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

By examining the patterns that develop in the chosen language of a poem, one can gain insight on the author’s intended meaning and tone. Draw connections between the individual boxes (words and subject) to determine how the parts of the poem are interrelated to enhance the thematic expressions.
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**Denotative values:** provide the literal core meanings of words

**Connotative values:** give the associations that imply the emotional atmosphere of words, often expressing approval or disapproval.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub dreams deferred</td>
<td>dreams put off, forgone</td>
<td>negative consequences in life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. dry up, raisin in sun</td>
<td>shriveled, fruitless</td>
<td>blacks wilt under societal prejudice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. fester, sore, run</td>
<td>festering virus, oozing</td>
<td>ongoing fight, social disapproval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. stink, rotten meat</td>
<td>spoiled, putrescence</td>
<td>forgotten dreams, ruined by injustice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. crust, sugar, syrupy sweet</td>
<td>saccharine, crystallized</td>
<td>false expectations, too good to be true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. sags, heavy load</td>
<td>weighty burden, barriers</td>
<td>insurmountable accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. explode</td>
<td>force, destroyed</td>
<td>burst under tremendous racial pressure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* Patterns of figurative language (similes) show dismal progression of African American dreams amidst the racism of white society. They struggle to maintain the hope a dream that is delayed until it ultimately transforms and mutates until it is no longer recognizable, and finally diminished.