

WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

Every new professional needs a mentor, and beginning teachers benefit from the kind veteran teacher down the hall. Johnson, Kay, and Stuart give us just that: the helpful voices of wisdom and experience. They welcome us into the best professional conversations with each other and leaders like Penny Kittle and Thomas Newkirk.

Their advice is sound. John Hattie's research provides the underpinning, and the authors show how to set up and run classrooms truly responsive to students.

Their advice is so practical! They offer multiple techniques, such as many ways to quote students in your classroom and how to leverage the grading load.

Best and most rare of all, their advice models learning. Pointing us toward online sources like the *Cult of Pedagogy* and the *National Writing Project*, they share how they have evolved as teachers, even creating language (buzzwordified!) and crackling the prose with concepts like literacy evangelism.

If I can't teach down the hall from these three, this book is the next best thing.

Gretchen Bernabei

Teacher, Consultant, and Author

Johnson, Kay, and Stuart are asking great questions that will lead to life-giving, sustainable ELA teaching and learning. The practices they describe in their own rooms leap off the page because of their authenticity and dynamic delivery. We need more books like this by teachers who love students and have a passion for building our profession by inviting others into their classroom practices in ways that allow educators and students to flourish.

Jonathan Eckert

*Author of *Leading Together: Teachers and Administrators Improving Student Outcomes**

Reading this book is like having three experienced mentors give you all the answers on the ELA teacher test! If you are looking for teaching moves, engaging assignments, and resources to cultivate a true learning community, get ready to be inspired. Truly a gift for early-career teachers looking for ideas, midcareer teachers who need a boost, and veteran teachers who are ready to be refreshed. Johnson, Kay, and Stuart shine a united voice of optimism on teaching in today's classrooms.

Carol Pelletier Radford

*Author of *Teaching With Light: Ten Lessons for Finding Wisdom, Balance, and Inspiration*; *Mentoring in Action: Guiding, Sharing, and Reflecting With Novice Teachers*; and *The First Years Matter: Becoming an Effective Teacher**

Matthew Johnson, Matthew Kay, and Dave Stuart have hit a home run with their new book *Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Middle and High School ELA*. Their practical suggestions for cultivating classroom community and instructional ideas are valuable for not only the novice educator, but the seasoned one as well. I found myself thinking of ways I could use their suggestions in my own university literacy teaching! This trio has crafted a text that ELA folks will want to keep on their desk so they can quickly reference these easy-to-implement classroom ideas.

Rebecca Harper

Author of *Write Now and Write On, Grades 6–12*

Johnson, Kay, and Stuart have written a book to help navigate the burning questions early-career teachers long to understand. From ways to build a community of learners to motivational instruction to feedback that works for students and teachers alike, these inspirational teachers share what it takes to craft a career for the long haul.

Andy Schoenborn

Coauthor of *Creating Confident Writers: For High School, College, and Life*

Matthew Johnson, Matthew R. Kay's, and Dave Stuart Jr. book *Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Middle and High School ELA* is an excellent resource for teachers looking to implement best practices in classrooms immediately. New teachers will find inspiration and resources as they plan and implement ELA curriculum in both the middle and high school English classroom. Johnson, Kay, and Stuart detail common challenges in the ELA classroom and provide practical strategies and solutions for the new *and* experienced teacher.

Theresa Walter

English Teacher, Nationally Board Certified Teacher (NBCT)

Johnson, Kay, and Stuart have written a book that would seem to answer every question I asked myself in the last year. They not only answer the questions with immediately useful suggestions one could apply to their class on the spot, but they also offer responses that are grounded as much in research as they are in optimism and joy. Though they began this book with beginning teachers in mind, they realized, as we all have in the last few years, that we are all new teachers who need the wisdom and practical strategies these three generous teachers offer us to do our job. My wife and I, because of the overwhelming demands of our personal and professional lives in the last few years, started getting one of those meal kits delivered a couple of days a week. I was reminded of those kits and how much they have helped us be a bit more healthy and balanced as I read *Answers to Your Biggest Questions*, which Johnson, Kay, and Stuart would no doubt appreciate, for in their introduction, they say we should use and think of their book “as a serious cook uses a new cookbook.” This book will help any teacher cook up lessons that are as consistently delicious as they are healthy—both for students and their teachers.

Jim Burke

English Teacher, Middle College High School and
Author of The Common Core Companion series

Under the weight of overwhelming expectations and intimidating systems of power, ELA teachers can ease their heavy load by hitching up with Johnson, Kay, and Stuart. From each of their unique teacher zones, the authors provide do-able options—rather than do-it-all presumptions—to help teachers strengthen learning communities with empathy, engagement, and equity. *Answers to Your Biggest Questions* offers a hope, clarity, and practicality needed to make this work lighter and brighter.

Erica Lee Beaton

Author of *The Good Enough Teacher*

In *Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Middle and High School ELA*, three great yet distinctive teachers have put together a book that hits that rare balance of big-picture inspiration and down-home practical advice. Matthew Johnson, Matthew Kay, and Dave Stuart make their teaching visible in a way that will work both for early-career teachers and (as Matthew writes) “anyone who wants to be new.” Most importantly, they keep it real: real questions, real dilemmas, and real responses full of options and activities. ELA teachers will want to keep this one close at hand.

Elyse Eidman-Aadahl

Executive Director, National Writing Project

Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Middle and High School ELA pools together the extensive classroom experience of Matthew Johnson, Matthew R. Kay, and Dave Stuart Jr. There are moments from their classrooms, their best strategies, and their favorite resources, all contextualized by powerful mental framing to help teachers of English language arts narrow their focus, work more efficiently, and make sure our valuable minutes with students move them forward as learners. Open up the book to any page, and you’ll find something you can use now—for example, my students have already considered the authors’ meaningful list of five reasons to read. This book will invite you to imagine better possibilities for you and your students.

Sarah M. Zerwin

High School Language Arts Teacher, Instructional Coach, and Author of *Point-Less: An English Teacher’s Guide to More Meaningful Grading*

Johnson, Kay, and Stuart are three of the best writers, sharpest thinkers, and kindest humans in our profession. These are the mentors every teacher should have! Written in engaging, heartfelt prose, *Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Middle and High School ELA* rings with teacher truths on every page. This book is a gift not only to new teachers but to all of us seeking a renewed commitment to our life’s work.

Jennifer Fletcher

Author of *Teaching Arguments* (2015), *Teaching Literature Rhetorically* (2018), and *Writing Rhetorically* (2021)

As a former high school English teacher, this book is the book I wish I had. As a high school principal, this is the book I will make sure is in the hands of every English and Language Arts teacher in my school. It is a thoughtful, practical and kind text that will help teachers build a student-centered English classroom with a culture of reading and writing that will help students years after they leave its walls.

Chris Lehmann

Founding Principal—Science Leadership Academy
Coauthor of *Building School 2.0*

ANSWERS *to Your*

BIGGEST QUESTIONS *About*

TEACHING
MIDDLE & HIGH
SCHOOL ELA

FIVE to
THRIVE

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Matthew Johnson
Matthew R. Kay
Dave Stuart Jr.

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For information:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
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United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative
Industrial Area
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India

SAGE Publications
Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

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Lydia Bowden
Assistant Principal, Gwinnett County Public Schools

Andy Schoenborn
English Teacher, Clare Public Schools

Theresa Walter
English Teacher, Great Neck Public Schools

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Matthew Johnson spent the first half of his career teaching middle school English language arts and social studies in Oregon and California, and he currently teaches high school American Literature, African American literature, composition, and film at a public magnet high school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is also a longtime track coach and the author of *Flash Feedback: Responding to Student Writing Better and Faster — Without Burning Out* (2020), a book about how to turn responding to student work from one of the most time-consuming, difficult, and often unsustainable parts of teaching into one of the most joyful and replenishing things we do as teachers.



Matthew R. Kay teaches kids at Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He currently teaches 9th and 10th graders English, and has taught elective courses in drama, critical race theory, and African American literature. He's also been an athletic director and is currently both the head varsity basketball coach and an assistant football coach. He is the author of *Not Light, But Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom* (2018). Finally, he's the executive director of the Philly Slam League, a non-profit that shows Philly-area young people the power of their voices through weekly spoken word competitions.



Dave Stuart Jr. teaches in a small town just north of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He's taught grades six through twelve during his career, in both English and social studies. He wrote about his comprehensive approach to simplifying teaching in *These 6 Things: How to Focus Your Teaching on What Matters Most* (2018), and he publishes weekly articles for teachers at DaveStuartJr.com/newsletter and weekly videos at DaveStuartJr.com/YT.



The time in which we write these words, autumn of 2021, is hardly an optimistic one for many educators. After 18+ months of pandemic teaching, educators across the country face immense workloads, social-emotional challenges, and burnout that they could have never imagined two years ago, while their schools and districts strain under teacher shortages and gladiatorial school board meetings.

Not much glimmer, right? And yet, we are deeply optimistic. True, there is a lot that is worrisome—some things we don't yet know, and much we can't control. But there is also so much that is exciting: new voices offering fresh solutions to old problems, new ideas and discoveries lighting the way to a better education system for all.

There is also so much that we do know, and thus can better control, now. We have more information each day about how students learn, what motivates them, and how and when they form community. And we also have more tools with each passing school year to be more efficient—to do a better job of communicating with and guiding students and responding to and assessing student work in less time, allowing us more balance in our own lives. This increased communal knowledge allows us greater control of these things in our classes, even when there are other things outside our classrooms that we wish we could control more.

This book is about the exciting developments and the things we know now and can control. It is about those new voices and ideas that hold the promise of helping make the lives of millions of students better. It is also about getting more efficient with the things that matter so that we can live more balanced and sustainable teaching lives. It is about growing more effective in our practice so we can better help students in this, and any future, hours of need, finding a way to thrive when even just surviving can feel like an unreasonable goal.

In short, this is an optimistic book about optimistic things because there is so much that is working and can work, and those are the things we need to move from this foggy and dark moment we are in to a better, brighter tomorrow.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

We originally wrote this book with an audience of brand new teachers in mind, basing it upon the things we wish we'd known in our first year or two with students. But as we wrote, the book slowly evolved into a book that also highlights the ways in which *all* teachers can refine their practice and the ways *all* teachers can balance the job, given the daily stresses so many teachers face.

Just a bit before finishing the final manuscript, Matt Kay said, “I think this book is for anyone who wants to be new.” Matt Johnson and Dave Stuart nodded vigorously in their Zoom call—yes. That’s just right. In the same way that each new fall offers an opportunity to be new and to finally do it right this year, this book looks at how—regardless of whether you are just beginning that first year or embarking on year 35 or 40 of a long and storied career—we can seek to be new and better and balanced in the week, unit, or school year to come.

This book is broken into five big questions—questions whose answers are fundamental to finding your footing or improving your groove as a classroom professional:

- 👉 How do I build a brave and supportive reading and writing community?
- 👉 How do I cultivate motivation in an ELA classroom?
- 👉 How do I ensure that my feedback and assessment are both as efficient, effective, and equitable as possible?
- 👉 What does strong ELA instruction look like?
- 👉 How can I keep doing this for my whole career?

In these chapters, we offer some of the things we’ve learned over our careers. Most of them are not new or unique to us. Instead, we showcase the moments, lessons, books, ideas, materials, and mentors that have helped us do what you are doing now with this book in your hands: striving to be better tomorrow than we are today.

WHO WE ARE

We are three midcareer, actively practicing high school English language arts teachers. We’re united in our heart’s desire to see teachers, and especially early-career teachers, gain their footing and flourish in this work long term. Here’s a bit more about each of us individually.

Matthew Johnson spent the first half of his career teaching middle school English language arts and social studies in Oregon and California, and he currently teaches high school American literature, African American literature, composition, and film at a public magnet high school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is also a longtime track coach and the author of *Flash Feedback: Responding to Student Writing Better and Faster—Without Burning Out* (2020), a book about how to turn responding to student work from one of the most time-consuming, difficult, and often unsustainable parts of teaching into one of the most joyful and replenishing things we do as teachers.

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In this book, you will find the teaching moves, assignments, and resources that we use in our classes to cultivate community; teach, respond to, and assess students; and build student identities as young readers, writers, and scholars. It also has the voices and reminders we turn to when we feel our candles burn low, want our students to get a little bit more metacognitive, or need to figure out how to reach that one student who seemingly can't lift his head up, no matter what we try.

As your starting point, we'd like you to think about this book as something akin to the lessons left on the copy machine, those little slices of teaching that you notice as you walk down the hall, or that colleague from next door who offers a new perspective that helps you to make that next lesson or unit just a little bit better. We also (at the risk of mixing metaphors) encourage you to use this book the way that a serious cook uses a new cookbook. Take what is useful, make it your own and improve upon it, follow the leads that you find interesting, and ultimately use it all to make something so new and nourishing that even those who didn't know that they were hungry will make space for an extra helping.

Best to you, colleague.
MJ, MK, and DS