



### ***The Urban Beowulf***

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:  
English IV (British Literature)

**Keywords:** Urban, register, writing, vernacular, written language, oral language, culture

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

**Synopsis:** “The Urban Beowulf” is a six day-course that will be taught to English IV students while reading Beowulf. The curriculum focuses on students converting their oral language to written language. Students tend to have merged the two registers, not realizing that each should have its own autonomy. Through a series of projects, students will engage in discourse that forces them to appreciate their oral culture. In doing so, they will learn to translate their spoken language, with all of its linguistic nuances, to a written language with grammatical functions. Students will also gain 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills that they will find relevant to their lives not only as high school students, but as emerging college freshmen. By the end of the course, they will have a well-written college essay which they can use as they apply to colleges. “The Urban Beowulf” also gives students the opportunity to use current technologies, like Facebook, to accomplish the task of distinguishing oral and written languages. Beyond these positives, teachers also have the opportunity to get a cultural understanding of the students they teach. They will understand the problems students have with grammar and writing through projects students will enjoy.

*I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 135 students in English IV.*

*I give permission for the Institute to publish my curriculum unit and synopsis in print and online. I understand that I will be credited as the author of my work.*

## **The Urban Beowulf: Merging Speaking and Writing**

*Giftly S. Allen*

### **Content Objectives**

#### **Introduction**

The curriculum unit “The Urban Beowulf” is written for English IV students or students studying British Literature. It is intended for a class of approximately twenty to twenty-five students. While large classes can also utilize the unit, it is easier for the teacher to target student needs with a small class size. The curriculum is written for English IV(British Literature) students; however, any English class can utilize the lesson and apply it to another piece of literature.

The school in which I will teach this curriculum unit is a large, urban public high school. The school consists of predominantly African American students. These students come from lower class families, and in many cases, from single-parent homes. Students attending the school also face many other issues in their personal lives that are often more important to them than their education. The neighborhood is also flooded with gangs, drugs, and random violence. While the school does numerous things to ensure that students are getting the best education, most of the problems begin in the neighborhood, and students, in turn, bring it into the school. When leaving school, many students face poverty and homelessness. Consequently, absences are high and grades are low. Nearly 71% of the students in the school receive lunch provided by the state because the parent(s) cannot afford it. In an effort to ensure that all students start their day with something to eat, the county provides free breakfast for all of its schools.

Because extra income is a necessity in many homes, students often seek jobs that eventually take precedence over their education. Consequently, they are more intrigued by education that they can use rather than education that forces them to think beyond their own paradigms of the world. Simply put, they want education they can use in the real world. Teachers, in turn, must develop crafty ways of integrating 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills with literature. This is especially important in English IV and British Literature, because there are numerous stories that students cannot relate to because of the unrealistic attitudes of life. For example, in Beowulf, there are many mythical creatures like Grendel and the dragon that Beowulf fights. Students have a hard time interpreting and comprehending the material because the information is far too unrealistic for them. One could argue that mythical creatures share similar parallels to that of fairytales told to children. However, many of these students are disconnected to imaginative

storytelling and have, therefore, lost their ability to connect with such texts. Though the idea of attending college is a distant thought throughout high school, students often change their minds during their senior year and do decide to attend a community college. It, then, becomes necessary that they are exposed to education that allows them to explore those nuances between oral and written language, which inevitably gives them the ability to manipulate grammar and writing for specific purposes.

This unit will take approximately five days and can easily be adapted into other lesson plans. Depending on the amount of time a teacher has in a class, the unit can be shortened or lengthened either to zone in on student needs or to brush through areas where students are advanced. Each day, students will build better grammar- and writing skills without being quite aware that they are learning. In my experience, students completely shut down when writing is mentioned. However, they are comfortable with writing short statements that do not follow grammatical functions because they are not used to speaking or writing in a formal register. This curriculum seeks to reverse this attitude by offering another vehicle for teaching grammar.

#### Rationale

Commonly, grammar is taught in isolation. That is, it has been autonomized from literature. In order for students to develop a taste for grammar, I have attached it not only to literature, but also to cultures with which students identify. Further, students in this population have a difficult time connecting and relating to texts. Creating ways for students to engage in a text while reading allows them not only to comprehend what is happening, but also to enjoy reading and learning. When students are presented with a text, they will conclude that they will not be able to comprehend the material. Therefore, they reject the idea of reading before the process begins. It is my hope that students develop a love for reading – even for those difficult pieces of literature that they might currently despise. Not only will this unit foster better grammar and writing skills, but students will see the parallels between modern language and British Literature. Beyond 12<sup>th</sup> grade, they will learn how to connect with texts when there is not an obvious correlation.

“The Urban Beowulf” will help students recognize the value of their oral language. Students have difficulty articulating their thoughts on paper. In many cases they will say, “I know what I want to say, I just don’t know how to write it down.” The problem here is that they lack the necessary skills to transfer oral language to written language. When writing, they attempt to ascribe to a standard of writing that is so far removed from their speech that it poses a problem. Thus, instead of simply constructing responses that lack fluidity and sophistication, they will learn to trust their oral language and learn to revise in order to switch registers.

### *College Readiness*

It is no secret that Americans are entering college in staggering numbers. The challenge in that is that many students are not prepared for collegiate writing. Because many of those students do not speak in a formal register, writing and grammar are difficult to grasp. They are constantly using slang and texting, which has affected their writing. Worst of all, they fail to distinguish written language from oral speech. After starting college, these students are not only faced with the normal battles of being a first-year college student, but also with writing and grammar. Many classes are writing intensive, and students struggle with meeting minimal expectations. College professors often expect incoming freshmen to know basic writing skills. Because of this, little is focused on remedial writing instruction. This unit teaches students to continue to embrace their oral culture while also accepting a new one.

I have written “The Urban Beowulf” for a number of reasons. The first is to simply create an environment in which students find reading education both necessary and fun. I want students to learn how to draw inferences from the text in order to determine universal themes and be interested enough to determine the meaning of words in order to comprehend sophisticated texts. This unit allows students to value their oral language while adding a written language. This is a workable concept if we become cognizant that cultural language is as much of a language as English, French, and Spanish. This concept is considered additive bilingualism, which “refers to a framework for understanding language acquisition and development as adding a new language rather than subtracting an existing one.”<sup>i</sup> If students are asked to answer a question orally, their response is normally more fluid than their written language is. This stems from the fact that they understand their lack of competence in the written register: Their grammar is academically inappropriate, so the thought of writing becomes intimidating. This curriculum will help them develop the grammar needed to make those transitions in language they lack.

### *Career Readiness*

Another reason for writing “The Urban Beowulf” is to help prepare students for the work force. This pertains to all students, because while some will attend community college following graduation, a vast majority will be looking for jobs right after high school. On the job, employees are often called upon for simple writing tasks. Students should be ready to complete writing tasks when they are requested. Most importantly, students will learn to adjust language to their environment.

### *Teacher Benefits*

Due to the atmosphere of the school, students tend to reinforce each other’s slang and vernacular grammar. They do not want to be characterized as studious and

articulate, because they believe it negates who they are and where they come from. Instead of this thinking, students should understand that their language should adjust dynamically to the expectations of their environment. They do not have to eliminate that which helps them identify with their culture, but rather manipulate language to fit the environment in which they are situated. Overtime, students will become comfortable using written language because they will discover that their spoken language can be translated to a written language.

## Objectives

The primary object of “The Urban Beowulf” is to have students engage in British Literature in a way that encourages them to make connections with the text while learning grammatical functions that will promote better writing skills. Currently, the English IV semester ends with students presenting their graduation projects. The graduation project is essentially an extension of a research paper completed during their junior year. A major component of the final grade focuses on speaking ability. In order for students to pass the presentation, they must have a 5- to 6-minute presentation where academic grammar, diction, and articulation must be used.

I will start the unit with students reading a shortened modern translation of Beowulf – usually the translation provided in any student textbook. It is important to begin with this translation because it is language that students understand. Older, less contemporary renditions into Modern English will be too dense to comprehend. After reading and discussing Beowulf, students will be introduced to short excerpts from the original text. Those excerpts will be in Old English. This portion of the lesson is essential because it allows students to see the importance of the oral tradition. The Anglo Saxons had an oral tradition that survived centuries. Students will understand that oral tradition was as important to the Anglo Saxons as it is to them. We will juxtapose the modern translation against an earlier version in order for students to recognize that texts and language change from audience to audience.

After students understand the importance of the oral culture, they will take their knowledge and understanding of Beowulf to create an “Urban Beowulf” page “Facebook” style. Students in the class will take on the roles of the characters in Beowulf to create dialogue, using their vernacular, from the epic poem.<sup>ii</sup> Over the course of three days, the student playing the role of Beowulf will update a status that will give the other characters an opportunity to respond. They must follow the ideas of the actual story, but use only their vernacular. This is the first opportunity students will have to appreciate their oral culture. Participating in a project that allows them to express their ideas in a language they are comfortable with, gives them an opportunity to really demonstrate their knowledge without the worry of grammar and mechanics.

During the second part of the curriculum, students will work in 3 groups (The Battle with Grendel, The Battle with Grendel's Mother, and The Battle with the Dragon) to transition from the colloquial language of Facebook to the more formal register of Edited Academic English. It is at this point that grammar will be explicitly discussed. Often, students in this population experience difficulty understanding the parts of speech. We will discuss writing practices that allow them to transition their oral language to a formal register. After each group commits their battle episode to the written page, each student within the group will complete a reflection. They will answer questions that encourage them to see the differences between their oral responses and their written responses, as well as identify an audience that each will appeal to.

The final piece of the curriculum focuses on students' ability to write a college essay. With students having grasped the concept of trusting their oral language, they can take a fun experience and now apply the concept to a more serious one. This portion allows students to take what they learned in previous pieces of the unit to create a work that will show mastery. 12<sup>th</sup> graders become particularly interested in doing things that pertain to them preparing for college. Even in the urban school setting, students seem to get motivated. This occurs because they are faced, for the first time, with making decisions that will affect their lives. Before this, most students are just trying to get to graduation. Once they are in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, however, they begin realizing that their peers are moving towards college and the military, and that mindset becomes contagious.

At the end of "The Urban Beowulf" students will have experienced reading a difficult text, learned to trust their oral language, and understood that written language is developed through the process of revision. Instead of focusing solely on written language, the curriculum allows students to use their oral speech and to become comfortable using it to begin the writing process. The Anglo Saxons understood the importance of their oral culture, and students should feel comfortable in this understanding as well. Through the process of viewing a modern version against an earlier version, it will become apparent that the modern version could not exist without the oral tradition.

## **Teaching Strategies**

### **Differentiation**

In order for students to successfully grasp the concepts of grammar, it is important that teachers incorporate numerous ways of engaging all students in the class. Because of this, the curriculum is designed to benefit both auditory and visual learners. In order to reach all students, the teacher must identify the different learners in the classroom in order to differentiate instruction. Differentiating instruction means "changing the pace, level, or kind of instruction you provide in response to individual learners' needs, styles, or interests." <sup>iii</sup> This curriculum addresses the four main components of differentiation:

rigor, relevance, flexibility, and complexity. They will engage in activities that are meaningful to their lives both during and after high school.

### Cultural Relevance

In order to reach students in this demographic, it is necessary to become aware of their culture. This will not only aid the teacher in developing lesson plans that will appeal to students, but it will also allow students to connect with what is being taught: “Culturally relevant teaching encourages students to learn collaboratively and expects them to teach each other and take responsibility for each other.”<sup>iv</sup> Teachers who use culturally relevant teachings will find that their students are more excited about learning and more willing to subject themselves to more difficult learning situations.

### Group Work

Throughout this curriculum, students will participate in various group work activities that will encourage them to engage in difficult texts. When working in groups, students who are shy during classroom discourse have the opportunity to speak up if they feel more comfortable in a smaller setting. Students who are well spoken will have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership capabilities. Beyond these advantages, “encouraging a community of learners means helping the students work against the norm of competitive individualism. The teachers believe that the students have to care, not only about their own achievement but also about their classmates’ achievement.”<sup>v</sup> Reading excerpts in Old English will be challenging for students in this population. However, with the support of a group, they can work together to find meaning and understanding.

### Classroom Activities

#### Day 1: Prologue and the Battle with Grendel

On the first day of the unit, students will have the opportunity to choose characters within Beowulf: Beowulf, the Geats, The Danes, Grendel, Unferth, People in the mead hall, and Hrothgar. Depending on the number of students in the class, the teacher can choose to have one student represent a collective body of characters, or students could be allowed to create subcharacters in the group. If there are many students, simply have them represent one of the Geats. By doing so, everyone in class will have an opportunity to participate in the “Facebook” assignment. After characters have been chosen, for homework, they will create a Facebook-style page using their character’s name. The student representing Hrothgar will make the first “status update” explaining what is happening in Herot, and all of the characters will respond. Students should create the dialogue for the prologue and for the Battle with Grendel. They must respond in their vernacular, including those colloquialisms that written language has rejected. From this assignment, the teacher will be able to decipher students’ understanding of Beowulf.

## Day 2: The Battle with Grendel's Mother

During day 2, students will form groups to discuss certain questions given by the teacher: What did you notice while posting? How does your vernacular aid you in understanding? Were there any variations of the same word? In what ways is your oral language different from Old English? In what ways is it similar? What questions would you like to ask the characters (students who posted)? What information are the characters leaving out? Through this discourse, students will learn to appreciate their vernacular, thereby understanding why the vernacular of Beowulf's time is important. For homework, students will continue with the Facebook postings, this time focusing on The Battle with Grendel's Mother. Like the night before, they will continue to use their vernacular.

## Day 3: Modeling and The Battle with the Dragon

As on the previous day, students will have group discourse about the posting from the night before. However, they will take their individual postings and grammatically, transition them from vernacular to written language. This is an excellent time to teach sentence structure and other parts of grammar that students are struggling with. This mini assignment will be a precursor to the next day's assignment.

Students will also have the opportunity to model a scene from Beowulf in groups. To ensure that students have comprehended the epic, it is important to allow them to articulate that understanding in a way other than speaking. Allowing them to be creative gives them the opportunity to engage within a text. Beyond creating an atmosphere to allow all students to participate, group work teaches students how to work together to achieve a common goal. For homework, students will complete their Facebook postings by creating their vernacular version of "The Battle with the Dragon."

## Day 4: Translating in Groups

At the beginning of class, students will move into five groups. Using a copy of their vernacular of Beowulf, which they have now completed, each group will translate one of Beowulf's battles into written language. There will be two groups who will translate the same piece. This will work excellently with showing students variety. Typically, they believe that there is only one style of writing that they must adhere to. After completing the translations, it will become obvious that every group took a different approach to writing. The teacher will read each group's translation in order to identify areas of grammar their students are struggling with.



## Day 5: Writing the College Essay

On the fifth day of the curriculum unit, the teacher will take excerpts from each group's translation and collectively edit as a class. After the class looks at each translation, the groups will come together to edit their written language. This gives students the opportunity to see that the writing process requires revisions. They will turn in their final piece before leaving class. For homework, students will choose a college-essay writing prompt. In order to have some variety, there will be five prompts that students can choose from. We will discuss how they will need to address the prompt. For homework, they will answer the prompt but only recording themselves. The recording must be for at least three minutes. They are allowed to pause throughout if they need to gather their thoughts.

## Day 6: Editing, Revising, Editing, and Revising

The following day in class, they will transcribe their audio. Again, they will translate their oral language to written language, using the grammar skills they acquired. They will revise and edit for grammar, diction, and content. This is yet another opportunity to emphasize the importance of grammar. Students will work in class to finalize their college essays. At the end of the class, the teacher will encourage some discourse from students to determine what they learned from the curriculum and how they can use the method of translating their oral language to written language beyond British Literature.

## “The Urban Beowulf”

### Day 1: Get Acquainted With Your Oral Language

Activity 1-We will discuss the differences between oral and written languages.

- Why are you more comfortable speaking than you are writing?
- Does spoken and written language have the same register?
- Why is spoken language important?

Activity 2-Review the list of characters from Beowulf. Determine the character whom you would like to represent for the Facebook project. I will create a “Facebook” work page named “Beowulf.” In class, you will create Facebook profiles using the character you chose and join the “Beowulf” group. For homework, using your vernacular and considering your knowledge of “The Prologue” and “The Battle with Grendel,” create the dialogue between the characters. The dialogue should retell the story.

- How does your oral register differ from that of the Anglo-Saxons?

## Day 2: Socratic Seminar

Activity 1-Journal Entry: What were some things you noticed while posting?

Activity 2-Place your desk into a large circle. Using a print-out of the dialogue created on the Facebook group, discuss the nuances between Old English and your oral language.

- How does your vernacular aid you in understanding?
- Where there any variations of the same word?
- In what ways is your oral language different from Old English? What ways is it similar?
- What questions would you like to ask the characters (students) as they posted?

Activity 3-For homework, you will continue with the postings by focusing on “The Battle with Grendel’s Mother.”

## Day 3: Modeling Story Lines

Activity 1-In groups of five, you will work with a group to model “The Battle with Grendel’s Mother” based on the Facebook postings from the night before. You can get creative as possible. Drawings, collages, and diagrams are great places to start. Each group will have 5-7 minutes to present their model at the end of class.

- What model did your group choose and why?
- Did your model stay true to the Facebook postings?
- The Anglo Saxons told epic poems orally. How does oral speech modify language over time?

Activity 2-For homework, you will finish the postings by focusing on “The Battle with the Dragon.”

## Day 4: Translating Languages: Oral Register to Written Register

Activity 1-Move into five groups. Each group will take one of Beowulf’s battles (there will be two groups working on the same battle) and translate it from vernacular to written language. You must use grammatical functions be consistent with the text from the Facebook postings.

- Compare the postings to the translation in your text book. What are some things that are different?
- What are words that are only unique to your vernacular? How did those words help you gather meaning?

- Where there any unfamiliar words on the Facebook postings? If so, how did you find the meaning?
- How does the style of your Facebook postings differ from the translation in the book? Does style change meaning?

Activity 2 -Choose one of the essay prompts listed below. For homework, using your cell phone or an available recording device, record yourself answering the prompt. You may take pauses if you need to gather your thoughts.

- What are your future goals and how can \_\_\_\_\_ university/college help you achieve it?
- If you could meet anyone from the past, who would it be and what advice would you get from them?
- What is the greatest lesson you have learned in life?

#### Day 5: Transcribing/Editing

Activity 1 -Using earphones, transcribe your audio from the night before and begin editing your essay.

- Was it easier to begin the writing process with your oral speech?
- Were you able to clearly articulate ideas?

Activity 2 -Switch papers with two of your classmates. Review their style, diction, and organization.

- Is your classmate's essay similar in style to yours? If not, are they still answering the essay prompt?
- What are you noticing about the different variations of style?

Activity 3 -For homework, continue editing your essay. Make sure you are paying close attention to grammar and organization.

#### Day 6: Revisions: Peer Editing

Activity 1 -Switch your paper with a peer. Edit your peer's paper for grammar and organization. On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions below.

- What kind of grammatical errors did the review have?
- Was the essay well organized and answered all parts of the prompt?
- What advice would you give to enhance your peer's paper?

Activity 2 -In five groups, create a way to explain what you learned about grammar, oral language, written language, and style. Be creative! Some things to consider as you are working in your group:

- What is the importance of grammar?

- Why is your oral language significant?
- How does editing help improve your written language?

## Resources

### Bibliography for Teachers

Heacox, Diane. *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom*, (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, 2002), 163.

In this text, Diane Heacox gives numerous ways of identifying the various types of learners in the classroom and effective strategies to differentiate instruction. Throughout the text, she sheds light how it is possible to teach every student despite nuances that seemingly divide them.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. *The Dream Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

This text takes the reader through the challenges African American students face while attending school. Ladson-Billings identifies reasons why many teachers find it difficult to connect with their students. The reason, however, centers on the fact that many teachers do not live in the area they work. Because of this, they find it difficult to understand the cultures of the students they teach. Consequently, she gives ways that a teacher can get beyond those barriers to create an environment where students feel comfortable in being themselves and excited to learn.

Nieto, Soni. *Affirming Diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004), 464.

Nieto, a current professor of literacy, language, and culture, focuses on diversity and how teachers can acknowledge it in the classroom. Her research focuses on case studies that aid in identifying effective teaching practices in culturally diverse classrooms.

Reinvald, Kairit. *The Wall Machine* (blog), February 04, 2013.  
<http://thewallmachine.com/aAS8Aa.html> (accessed November 24, 2013).

This web page has an example of the Facebook blog students will create. Students who participated in this sample blog pretended to be the characters from Beowulf but posted status updates as if Beowulf were in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If students in the class are confused with instructions about creating the Facebook page, this is an excellent reference guide.

## Materials for Classroom Use

### *Reading Material*

Students will read a modern, shortened version of Beowulf prior to starting the curriculum. With reading and comprehension complete, the teacher will have ample time to adequately work through problems students are having with grammar throughout the duration of the curriculum. On day one, students will have the opportunity to also read short excerpts from an older version, thereby being able to juxtapose styles.

In order for teachers to teach effectively, they must understand the culture of the students they are teaching. Heacox, Nieto, and Ladson- Billings all focus on the struggles of students growing up in urban and underrepresented environments. The authors also take a very close look at culture and how it can pose a problem with student learning if the teacher is not familiar with those things they identify with. These texts give good insights into how students learn and what methods work best for them.

### *Samples and Templates*

Because students will be writing and editing college essays, it is important that they have excellent examples of what one ought to look like. As a class, students should review the elements of what comprises a well organized essay. It will be essential to contain various forms of the college essay in order for the class to see the various styles. Typically, students feel that their writing must fit into a specific format; the examples will encourage them to be creative in their writing.

## **Implementing Common Core Standards**

### **L.11-12.1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.**

Throughout this unit, students will utilize a variety of speaking and writing functions in order to properly identify grammatical functions within language. In “The Urban Beowulf,” students will be able to apply grammatical functions to written language that does not necessarily apply to their spoken language. This will give them the opportunity to see the differences between the two registers.

### **L.11-12.2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of Standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.**

Throughout the course, students will not only utilize grammatical functions in their writing, but also mechanics. This will become important as students work to complete their college essays. In doing this, they will see the importance of these functions because it is situated in context that is relevant to them.

### **L.11-12.4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grades 11–12 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.**

Before beginning the curriculum, students should read Beowulf and comprehend the text. “The Urban Beowulf” requires students to have a clear understanding of each of Beowulf’s battles; otherwise the projects will become problematic.

### **W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.**

Students will utilize the informative/explanatory style of writing as they complete their college essays. Because these essays usually have word counts, it is important that they learn to inform concisely and explicitly. They will also learn why organization is important to the structure of the information given.

## End notes

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<sup>i</sup> Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: the sociopolitical context of multicultural education*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004), 464.

<sup>ii</sup> KairitReinvald, *The Wall Machine* (blog), February 04, 2013, <http://thewallmachine.com/aAS8Aa.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> Diane Heacox, *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom*, (Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, 2002), 163.

<sup>iv</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dream Keepers Successful Teachers of African American Children*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 225.

<sup>v</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dream Keepers Successful Teachers of African American Children*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 225.