

Dear Parents,

Many of you have questions concerning the culminating project. Hopefully this will answer many of them!

Purpose

The purpose of the culminating project is three fold. First and foremost, it is a research and writing project. According to the State Writing Standards, eighth grade students are required to practice the writing process through a tiered approach. This approach includes researching, writing note cards, creating an outline, writing a rough draft, editing and revising, and then completing a final draft according to MLA guidelines for format and documentation of sources. While the eighth graders are working through this process, it is preparing them for the types of research papers they will be expected to complete in high school and college. Thus the second purpose is exposure to the process. Many former students have returned telling me that they relied on what they had learned through the culminating project to help them with their high school essays. Finally, and probably the most important purpose of this project, by taking a good, hard look at the pros, cons, and Catholic sides of the issues, the students are required to THINK. In grade school, teachers and parents guide the students in most every aspect of their learning process. In eighth grade, it's time for us to begin pulling back and letting our young people figure some things out for themselves. Believe me, it's hard for both of us! Yes, we still guide them, but it is up to the students to create their thesis and then prove it through their research. That requires them to *think* about it, including what the Church in her wisdom has said sometimes for decades. Then they have to *decide* what supports their thesis and what helps prove their point.

Format

As stated earlier, we use MLA format (remember when you had to write papers in college?) so the students gain familiarity with how to cite sources and other formatting issues. The first paragraph must contain a thesis statement (the point that the essay will prove). The thesis will be pro, con, or Catholic depending on which essay the student is working on. The second paragraph must contain background or defining information so that the reader is familiar with the topic. In order to be able to argue one side or the other, we have to know a bit about its history and why it is such a controversial topic in the first place. The body of the essay will be proving the thesis with direct quotes from sources, details to explain the information, and then comments made to tie both back to the thesis. It is a good rule of thumb to have three specific points (paragraphs) to build the argument for the thesis. Finally, the essay ends with a concluding paragraph that sums up the main points and basically leaves a lasting impression on the reader that indeed, the student did prove the thesis. The last page of the essay is the works cited page. This documents every

source that the student used to write this particular paper. Not every source that the students use will be recorded on every works cited page-just the ones used for that essay. The students have a research paper writing handbook, their English book, and a link on the class webpage that remind them how to write the works cited page. Students should use a minimum of three different sources and include at least three quotes within each essay. Most essays are about two pages in length plus the works cited page.

Timeline

The culminating project primarily takes place during the second semester. Topic formation is encouraged the summer prior to eighth grade, but it is really in fall that students have to know what it is they want to write about. I encourage students to watch the news, read the newspaper headlines, and talk to parents about what issues are out there that 1) they are interested in; and 2) they can argue from the three different perspectives.

Students are expected to obtain both a Wichita and Kansas library card. The Wichita Public Library card can be acquired at any branch-the closest to us is the Westlink branch near St. Francis of Assisi Church just off of Tyler. While there, I ask that the students apply for a Kansas Library Card. It is free and is valid for two years. I like the students to use the research database that the Kansas card offers. Instead of doing a Google search and sifting through whatever may pop up, the articles available in this database have already been screened by libraries. This makes searches safer and can give a more reliable source of information. After Thanksgiving, we take two days of class to use these cards to search. The Wichita Public Library has an online card catalogue. This allows students to read synopses of books to see if they are suitable for their needs or not. If so, for a small fee, students may reserve the book. This is great because we are not the only school completing research projects! Students may also use the public library database to view on-line articles on both sides of their issues. I encourage the students to have at least one book on reserve and at least three on-line articles printed before we go on our library field trip.

During the first or second week of December, the class takes a day to travel to the Downtown (Central) branch of the Wichita Public Library. This also has several layers of purpose. First, it exposes the students (and sometimes parents 😊) to the resources our public library system has to offer. Second, the students learn to navigate the library by using the digital card catalogue (the same we looked at at school), the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, and other resources necessary for our project. Finally, going to the library forces the students to be organized, to find information, and to make judgments on the value of such information. We come home from the library pretty tired, but we should be finished gathering information. Over Christmas break, students are to read through their information (if book sources, the chapters that apply) and take notes on the information pertinent to their pro/con reports.

When school resumes in January, we begin the PRO essay. I conference with each of the students when they turn in their note cards. I'll tell them what they need (either more details, more quotes, etc) in order to produce a quality paper. Upon my approval, they may write their outline. This is not a draft, just a more formal way of grouping information into what will later become paragraphs. In the outline, students write bits of information, quotes they want to include, and idea fragments that they will want to expand on. Once again, they will conference with me and I'll give them advice on what to add, where their weak points are, or what's really solid. From there, they will write a rough draft. It is their responsibility to run the spell check, check for fragment and run-on sentences and a litany of other proofreading skills I expect them to perform. I give a hand out with a list of skills and points to look for as they are editing their papers. They are required to have a classmate, parent, sibling, or other trusted editor read their draft and help them discover errors or weak spots. Once this has been done and modifications made, the student may print off a final draft, complete with a works cited page, to turn in. I will grade the final draft and fill out a rubric very similar to what the students were given in class. The rubric uses the Six Traits of Writing as the basis for their scores. It also includes the required elements of the paper such as the thesis, quotes, flow, and formatting. Basically, did the student prove the thesis? As each essay is graded, I have another conference with each student to go over what they did right, and what they need to work on to improve in the next go 'round. I keep the final draft in their file at school, but parents can come and look at it if they wish. I post the final scores on PowerSchool. By this time, the library books are due. Students may return their books to any branch (even the Westlink branch) of the library and they will be transported back to Central.

February settles in after Catholic Schools Week, and students begin the writing process again with their CON essay. This is typically easier as they have already done the research and have written and conferenced on the PRO side. The same procedures apply.

During March, three things happen. We spend a couple of class days examining Catholic sources. I find that it is easier to start this together as several students can use the same sources and can collaborate on ideas. For example, *Humane Vitae*, the encyclical on human life, is used quite a bit by our students. It is impossible for me to be available to the entire class at the same time to go through Catholic sources individually, so we work on it together and I eventually get around to each group. Remember, this is just a start of their Catholic research. The rest of it is done as homework. March also brings State Assessments. We have to shift our focus from the culminating project to preparing for the reading assessment. After that we have Spring Break. Over the break, I'd like the students to work on their rough drafts and their artistic expressions (see note from Wanda).

Somewhere between Spring Break and Holy Week, I want the students to complete their final draft of their Catholic stance. They should also complete their artistic expression. The rest of April will be spent preparing for the presentation of their research.

Presentation

Students are to create a PowerPoint presentation of their essays. They include the main points of each of their three essays and add pictures and quotes to make an effective background to what they will say. Students are required to have a cover slide with the topic, a background/history slide, and then at least three each of their PRO, CON, and Catholic positions. Embedded in these slides should be their main points, quotes, and images to back up what they are talking about. They are required to include a graph of their statistics from at least one of their positions. Ms. Hilger will help them to make a graph in technology class. From my experience, it is a much more time effective to just make a graph than to search endlessly on Google for one that “kind of” matches. Students in the past have sometimes included YouTube clips where appropriate. So, the PowerPoint is really where everything comes together. The final page is a works cited of all of their information that they included in the PowerPoint along with citing any images used. I have at least one to two after school sessions to work on the PowerPoint because our class time is very limited. Most students use a flash drive to save their work from school to take home and vice versa.

May brings all of the excitement of eighth grade promotion, but we have to contain ourselves until we bring all of our hard work on the culminating project to fruition. Sometime between the first and second week of May, school is dismissed so the eighth graders may present their research. The school’s staff and a panel of alumni listen to the students and watch their presentations of both the PowerPoint and their artistic expression. Each student has a designated time to present. They are expected to dress as professionals, arrive early, and be prepared. The panel may ask the students questions at the end of their presentations. Many times, the panel will ask because the student did not clarify his or her point. This is why it is so important that the students take my advice way back in the outlining process. If the point is not made or is supported by weak evidence, the panel will notice and call the student on it. At that point, all I can say is that I had talked to the student about this issue during the writing process and they chose to ignore my advice. Believe me, it is better to put the work into finding solid evidence in the writing process, than to give weak evidence and look ill-prepared. The panel is usually very gracious and applauds each student’s efforts. This is a learning process after all, and they do not expect any student to be an expert, but they do expect the student to use good public speaking skills and have a good grasp of the information he or she is presenting. After the presentations, I summarize all of the panel’s comments for each individual and have my last culminating conference with each of the students. On their last day of school, the eighth graders may bring their file home. Since they have an eighth grade scrapbook, I recommend that they put their papers in that. What a fun bit of nostalgia it will be in ten or twenty years!

Parents are an integral part of this process. I rely on you to give your child advice, to help them stay on top of due dates, and to help them edit. It is a perfect time to have conversations with

your child on the importance forming an opinion on a topic only after viewing both sides and looking at what the Church tells us. If you have any questions along the way, please let me know and I would be happy to answer them.

Sincerely,

Jenny Peloquin

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