



National Steinbeck Center

Steinbeck Young Authors  
Writing Coach Workshop Guide

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## Steinbeck Young Authors Program Description

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*"I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist... It might even be the greatest of arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit."*

John Steinbeck, 1955

Developed to address the need to improve middle school student writing, the Steinbeck Young Authors Program also is intended to emphasize the joy of writing and to introduce students to the idea of higher education, as well as to the works of John Steinbeck and the National Steinbeck Center. The Steinbeck Young Authors Program consists of three stages: a classroom component, a day-long event for teacher-nominated student finalists at the National Steinbeck Center, and an awards ceremony.

### **Stage One: Classroom Component**

6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers implement a drop-in curriculum unit which includes engaging classroom activities and progressive writing activities organized around the study of Steinbeck's book, *The Red Pony*. The curriculum includes a rubric for assessing the students' writing skills, that will be used by the coaches and the judges in Stages Two and Three. The goal of the drop-in curriculum unit is to enhance students' writing skills and to support proficiency toward California State Standards. The project does not replace the existing curriculum taught in the classroom.

Each teacher selects two students who will move on to the next level of the program, in one of the following categories: Proficient/Advanced Writer, Emerging Writer, or English Language Learner Writer. Students are not aware of the category in which their essay is to be judged. All students participating in *The Red Pony* curriculum unit receive a special membership to the National Steinbeck Center. The goal is that every participating student is a winner.

### **Stage Two: Day of Writing**

During March, nominated student finalists from participating teacher classrooms attend a day-long event, the Day of Writing, at the National Steinbeck Center. The schedule for the Day of Writing includes: hands-on activities related to horse care and responsibility; students writing to a prompt related to Steinbeck's novel; lunch with a coach to discuss the student's writing; and additional time for students to edit and revise their draft into a final essay. By the end of the Day of Writing, students submit their finished essay for review by a panel of judges.

### **Stage Three: Awards Ceremony**

A panel of experts judges the student writing in each category (Advanced/Proficient, Emerging, and English Language Learner). Winning essays are announced for the following: Jody Award, Gabilan Award, and Billy Buck Award for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> places. In addition, each category may provide a Judges Award for unusual achievement, such as highly descriptive prose, outstanding use of language, or unique perspective. The award specifics are decided by the panel at the time of judging. All students who participate in the Day of Writing receive a certificate of participation. The Awards Ceremony recognizes participating students, schools, and teachers. Members of the community are invited to attend.

## **Steinbeck Young Authors Role and Responsibilities of the Writing Coach**

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The primary purpose of the writing coach is to provide positive and effective feedback to a middle school student. This feedback assists the student in editing and improving his/her essay in accordance with the writing rubric. One of the secondary purposes is to impress upon the student the importance and practical use of good writing skills.

As a volunteer writing coach, your responsibilities are as follows:

- 1) Attend the Writing Coach Workshop on **the Day of Writing**.
- 2) After the Writing Coach Workshop, meet your student, have lunch with them, and take a photo which will appear in the Gabilan Journal. You'll meet to discuss his/her essay draft and potential revisions until **1:30 p.m. at the National Steinbeck Center**. During this meeting, you provide positive and effective feedback to a student on his/her writing.
- 3) Following your student meeting, we ask that you complete an evaluation form that provides feedback about the program.

In celebration of the student finalists, an Awards Ceremony will be held in April at the National Steinbeck Center. You are invited and encouraged to attend.

## Synopsis of “The Gift”

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### Characters

Billy Buck: an aging farm hand working at the Tiflin Ranch.

Mrs. Tiflin: the mother of Jody, responsible for cooking the meals.

Jody: a ten-year old boy, shy and polite.

Carl Tiflin: Jody’s stern father, a disciplinarian.

### Setting

A farm in the valley outside of Salinas. “The Gift” begins at the end of summer and concludes during the rainy season.

### Synopsis

The story starts with Carl and Billy Buck taking some cows and horses into Salinas after breakfast. Jody watches them leave and observes buzzards circling overhead. Jody suspects an animal has died nearby because of the presence of the buzzards. “Jody hated them as all decent things hate them, but they could not be hurt because they made away with carrion (page 5).” Jody then returned home, was inspected by his mother, and then walked to school. He started the journey by filling his pockets with white quartz that lay in the road. He came home from school and completed his chores (filling up the wood box and collecting eggs from the chickens).

Carl and Billy Buck came home after dark, and wouldn’t tell Jody what they had done. Jody’s father sent him to bed early since he was going to “need him in the morning” (page 7). After breakfast the next morning, Carl and Billy Buck took Jody to the barn where there was a new pony. Carl warned Jody that he would sell the pony if Jody did not take care of it properly. After Carl left, Billy Buck talked to Jody about how the pony was obtained from a Sheriff’s auction in Salinas, how Jody was to care for the pony, and showed Jody the new saddle. Jody decides to name the pony Gabilan Mountains, until Billy Buck suggests he should shorten the name to Gabilan, which means ‘hawk’.

Gabilan became a source of pride for Jody. He brought over friends from school to show off his new pony. After Jody received the pony, he got up early every morning just to spend time with it. Jody listened carefully to the horse stories that Billy Buck shared with him because Billy Buck was one of the most knowledgeable horsemen in the area. In the fall, Billy Buck and Jody began the training of Gabilan, first by halter breaking, then working with the long halter, and then fitting the saddle. Carl told Jody that he could ride Gabilan on Thanksgiving. Shortly before Thanksgiving, Jody asked Billy Buck if it was going to rain that day, since he left Gabilan outside in the corral. Billy Buck said it would not rain, and the pony would be fine if it got a little wet. “A little rain never hurt anything” (page 23).

It did rain. After the afternoon in the rain, Gabilan became sick, and Jody began to worry. Billy Buck worked with Gabilan while Jody was at school, but the pony continued to get worse. Billy Buck diagnosed Gabilan as having the stranglers. Billy Buck created concoctions to clear Gabilan’s nasal passages, lanced his boils and eventually cut a small hole in the pony’s neck to help it breathe. Jody stayed with Gabilan overnight in the barn. In the morning, Jody awoke to find Gabilan gone. He followed the trail to find Gabilan dying under the circling buzzards. Just as the pony died, a buzzard began to eat the head. Jody ran towards the buzzard, caught it as it took off, and killed it with a piece of white quartz in his pocket. Billy Buck pulled Jody off of the buzzard while Carl said to Jody, “the buzzard didn’t kill the pony. Don’t you know that?” (page 37). Billy Buck then became angry with Carl and replied “Jesus Christ! Man, can’t you see how he’d feel about it?” (page 37).

# **Steinbeck Young Authors Guidelines for Student Meeting and Coaching**

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The meeting between the student and the writing coach is an important element in achieving the goals of this program. Through the interaction with the coaches, the students should explore the excitement of writing and enhance their writing skills. Because middle school students can be very self-conscious and apprehensive, it is important that the feedback be encouraging and helpful. It is important that the coaches create a positive and enthusiastic tone for the conversation.

## **Suggested Sequence for Student Meeting/Coaching Session**

- 1) Introductions: How did the writing go? Share some personal stories. Inquire about student activities  
from today and some of the student's interests.
- 2) Photo session and Lunch
- 3) Discussion about writing
  - A. Overview of writing experience
  - B. Encourage the student to read the first draft essay aloud and also silently
  - C. Emphasize the positive (two areas of strength)
  - D. Provide guidance and support (two areas for improvement)
  - E. Final encouragement
- 4) Writing Coach evaluation

## **Introductions**

Each student is assigned a writing coach on the Day of Writing. You and your student will have your picture taken and lunch together, and then are invited to find a comfortable location in the museum to begin your coaching session.

To break the ice with your student, you might ask him or her to tell you about

- The horse demonstration that morning and what responsibilities are needed to take care of a horse.
- You may want to congratulate the student for being recognized for their writing at the student's school.

## **Discussion about Writing**

- A.** We recommend that you start your meeting with the student by talking about writing in general.
  - How does the student feel about writing?
  - Is it something he/she likes doing or is it nerve-racking?
  - Share your own feelings about writing and one or two examples of how writing has enabled you to accomplish a goal or do something "cool" (e.g., getting a job you enjoy, obtaining a college degree, traveling, winning a contest or award, helping someone in need, etc.). Please share these with the student. As a role model, we want you to model how writing is an important life skill and can be a vehicle for accomplishing great things.
- B.** Student reads aloud first draft essay.

- Ask your student to read aloud the first draft essay and you are an attentive listener.
- The second reading of the draft may be a silent one.
- Encourage your student to hold a pencil and become proactive with the draft essay.
- Provide time and encouragement for the student to add information into the essay, revise ideas, add details and examples while you are together in the coaching session.

### C. Emphasize the Positive

After reading the student's first draft essay, read over the writing rubric and together select the two strongest components of the written work. The objective is to highlight the positive aspects of the student's work first. For example, the essay might be organized with an introduction, body, and a conclusion. In this case, you would tell the student that he or she has a well-organized essay and give examples of why you think so.

### D. Provide Guidance and Support

Read over the writing rubric again, and together select the two weakest components of the written work. For example, the essay may have a central idea or thesis but seems to be missing specific details or supporting evidence or information. Gently tell the student that you think the essay would be stronger if he/she gave a couple of examples that support the thesis and give some examples of how he or she might do this. Encourage your student to tell his/her own story as support in the essay. A student might be weak in the area of grammar and spelling, so together you talk about and revise these areas.

If you have more time, you can talk about other strong and weak components of the paper.

### E. Final Encouragement

End the coaching session with your student by congratulating him/her for representing their school in the program, thanking them for participating in the Day of Writing, and giving them encouraging words for the final editing of their essay.

### **Writing Coach Evaluation**

Prior to leaving, please complete a Writing Coach Evaluation Form in the Coach Training Room. This information will be used to shape the Steinbeck Young Authors program next year and other writing programs at the National Steinbeck Center.

Thank you for volunteering to support student literacy!