

The Power of Words

Student Handout

Background

A powerful agent is the right word.

---Mark Twain

Words well chosen have the power to inform, influence, educate, and entertain. In this program, we've gathered a panel of writers to discuss creativity and the writing process. They share their personal thoughts and experiences about the challenges and rewards of being a professional writer in the fields of politics, film, poetry, and literature. Joining us as guests are Amy Tan, Carol Shields, George Lucas, Stephen Ambrose, Rita Dove and the Honorable Alan Simpson.

People, Places and Events

You may already be familiar with people who use the power of words in their professions. Conduct a brainstorming session with your fellow classmates to generate a list of at least five individuals whose writing abilities have made a noticeable difference in their field. Next identify a significant contribution or key event in their lives. And then determine the geographic location or place associated with that event.

Person.....Place.....Event

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Program Guests

Pre-Program Explorations

Terms to Define

- character
- dialogue
- diary
- film animation



Stephen E. Ambrose, Ph.D. Best-selling Historian

Stephen Ambrose is a preeminent American

- historical research
- inspiration
- journal
- limerick
- Muse
- novel
- pc (politically correct)
- plot
- poem
- screen play
- structure

Topics to Research

- What are the major literary genres and the basic elements of their structure?
- What is meant by the term "the writing process" and what roles do creativity, personal choice and experience, the nature of words, and the structures of composition play in the writing process?
- What is the occupation and position in public life of the Academy of Achievement panelists and what are the types of writing for which they are well known?
 - Ambrose, Stephen E.
 - Dove, Rita
 - Lucas, George
 - Shields, Carol
 - Simpson, Alan K.
 - Tan, Amy
- Who are the following literary figures, which genre is their specialty, and

historian and best-selling author. He studied American history at the University of Wisconsin, earned his doctorate, and became a college teacher. As a 28-year-old historian he worked with Dwight Eisenhower on his presidential biography. He later went on to publish biographies of Crazy Horse and General Custer, a three-volume study of Richard Nixon and three books about World War II. His distinguished literary career culminated recently with two simultaneous best sellers: *Undaunted Courage* and *Citizen Soldiers*. *Undaunted Courage* is the definitive tale of Lewis and Clark's remarkable expedition. In a different vein, *Citizen Soldiers* gives the GI's view of World War II in Europe from D-Day to the surrender of Germany. His 20 books all share his love of American history and his admiration of American heroes.

World War II is rarely far from Stephen Ambrose's mind. It shaped the cultural and historical context of his 1940s boyhood in Wisconsin. He's written eight books about the war in all. Ambrose taught history for 30 years at the University of New Orleans. It was a choice of venue entirely determined by emotion, he says. "I went down there one spring vacation during college and

what is their significance in the world of writers?

- Gilbert, Sir William Schwenck and Sir Arthur Sullivan
- O'Connor, Flannery
- Plath, Sylvia
- Sayers, Dorothy
- Shakespeare, William
- Woolf, Virginia

- Who are the authors of the following works and what are their subjects?

- *A Confederacy of Dunces*
- "Daddy"
- *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*
- *Right in the Old*
- *Gazoo: A Lifetime of Scraping with the Press*
- *Small Ceremonies*
- *Star Wars Trilogy*
- *The Kitchen God's Wife*
- *The Joy Luck Club*
- *The Republic of Love*
- *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*

- Who are the following historical figures and why are they important?

- Dwight Eisenhower
- Karl Marx
- Meriwether Lewis
- Thomas Jefferson

- What are some of the major benchmarks in the progress of research and

just fell in love with that old bag of bones of a city," he says. He's still in love with it, he says, though he's now moved east to Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. However his love affair with academic history has cooled. "Academic history has lost the power of the narrative." "It's lost its audience. And they don't even know it. Their audience is 18-, 19-year-old Americans. And those kids come into the classroom and look up at you and say, "Tell us about our heroes and what did they do?" And they don't get any answers from academic historians. . But you got to tell them what it was really like at Valley Forge. And how tough Washington's decision was in dealing with the Hessians. You have to give them the foundation of what this country's all about."

These days Ambrose is the chief source for the recent Ken Burns PBS television special on Lewis and Clark and a benefactor of the Lewis and Clark Museum. Tourists entranced with his book are rediscovering American history and flocking to the Missouri River country. That, says Ambrose, is the finest tribute they could pay him.

[Rita Dove](#)
Former Poet Laureate of the United States

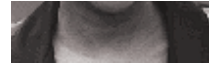


writing on the creative process in the last few decades?

- What are some of the major benchmarks in the progress of research on and teaching of the writing process in the last few decades?

Issues to Consider

- Do you believe that achievement as a writer is a function of talent, inspiration, hard work, luck, or some combination of these?
- Do you think words are powerful and, if so, in what ways are they powerful? Are the sounds, textures, and specific meanings of words important?
- What defines success? Which of the following do you think are the most important criteria for judging the successful life: wealth, power, fame, financial gain, the praise of others, personal fulfillment, happiness and satisfaction, the opportunity to do the work you love, self-knowledge, virtuous behavior, trust and kindness, love and a positive family life.
- Do you think the writer makes an important contribution to the lives of individuals and to society?



Rita Dove was the youngest and the first black American to serve as Poet Laureate of the United States. Called the lyric poet of her generation, Dove is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. A high school honor student and Presidential Scholar from Ohio, she graduated summa cum laude from college and received a Fulbright Scholarship. Her work "Thomas and Beulah," a 44-poem collection evoking the lives of her grandparents, earned her the Pulitzer Prize.

Rita Dove wants to re-create for the young her own awe-struck discovery of poetry's power, which began when she took down an anthology of American verse from the bookshelf in her family's home in Akron. After that, her otherwise strict parents made no attempt to censor what she read, and she read everything from *Gone With the Wind* to Sylvia Plath. "I remember reading [Plath's] poem *Daddy*, which ends, "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through," says Dove. "I realized that you don't have to be polite in poetry, and I couldn't get enough of it after that."

At first Dove's love affair with poems unfolded with little encouragement or

individuals and to society as a whole? How crucial is the role of the writer in modern society?

- What changes has technology brought to the writing process and to the distribution and reading of books in the last two decades? What changes do you anticipate will occur in the next two decades as a result of new advances in technology?

Post-Program Explorations

Achievement Explorations

- Achievement Television has defined six components of achievement: vision, preparation, integrity, courage, passion, and perseverance. Choose one of the featured guests and give examples of ways in which he/she embodies these traits.

- Choose one of the featured guests and analyze the role personal ideals and values have played in defining this person's character and choices as a writer. Do these ideas and values contribute to your view of the person as an achiever?

English/Language Arts Explorations

- Identify the genres of writing practiced by the featured guests in this panel discussion. Explain the differences in the way the writer develops material for the different genres, according to each guest's description of his/her writing process. Do certain genres share similar approaches? Why is the writing process different for

encouragement or interference from her teachers. That convinced her that poetry should be experienced, not talked or taught to death. "One of the major reasons why poetry has gotten a bad rap is that at school we had to read a poem and then answer questions about it," says Dove. "But I think that when a poem moves you, it moves you in a way that leaves you speechless. Poems, if they're really wonderful poems, have used the best possible words and in the best possible order, and anything you say about them seems like a desecration. I think I grew up without that feeling of oppression because when I began to read poems, no one told me anything. I was just reading these things and deciding for myself."

Dove says, "A good poem is like a bouillon cube. It's concentrated, you carry it around with you, and it nourishes you when you need it."

approaches. Why is the writing process different for different genres?

- Select one of the panelist's works as the subject for a reading and research project. Read at least one full-length novel, screen play, collection of poems, or historical work. Find reviews of the work and write an assessment of the quality of the writing. Conclude this assessment with insights about the writer from your viewing of "The Power of Words" video.
- In the course of the panel discussion, the following writers are mentioned as influences or models whose words or approaches to writing are important to one of the panelists. Research one or more of these writers, identifying major works, the writer's influence during his own time period, and the reasons for the author's sustained influence on current writers:
 - Gilbert, Sir William Schwenck and Sir Arthur Sullivan
 - O'Connor, Flannery
 - Plath, Sylvia
 - Sayers, Dorothy
 - Shakespeare, William
 - Toole, John Kennedy
 - Woolf, Virginia
- The panelists strongly recommend the habit of keeping a daily diary or journal in which you write about yourself for at least 15–20 minutes every day. Sometimes it is difficult to write without pausing, erasing, editing, and censoring what you write. In a diary or journal, however, there should be no erasing or censoring. Instead, this writing should be a free flow of thoughts, simply a recording of exactly what the thoughts are in your mind during the moments when you are writing. The most productive way of writing in this mode is to maintain a continuous, constant flow without lifting your pen from the page, a method called free writing. Try this experiment: Free write in a diary or journal for 15 minutes every night for two full weeks. When you complete each night's writing, pause and identify the subjects you wrote about and observe your writing style. Write a short note about what you observe. At the end of the two weeks, write an account of the changes you observe in the topics of interest and concern to you, in the way you write, and in your attitude toward writing.
- Carol Shields proposes that a writer identify a physical

image to serve as a useful hook for structuring writing -- the idea that the nine months of the academic year, the controlling structure of her first novel, *Small Ceremonies*, were like nine cars of a freight train. Select a physical object that is important to you. Draw a picture of the object. Compose a short piece of writing -- a poem, a dialogue, a short narrative, or an essay -- that is structured like the object you chose. Shields' image of freight train cars enforced relatively equal chapter lengths. What are the sizes and shapes of the parts of the object you chose and what implication do these structures have for the shape of your composition?

- George Lucas recommends that a writer work from 9:00 to 5:00 every day, whether he feels like writing or not. Carol Shields reminds us that two pages of writing a day, yields ten in a week, and a book at the end of the year. Stephen Ambrose argues that the writing process itself evokes topics for research and writing. A full day of writing even once a week for an entire year would be difficult for most students. However, try setting aside three hours a week for a month. Start writing that piece you've always imagined creating: a children's book, a story, a poem, a film script, a television play, a complaint, an editorial letter. Rather than staring at the page, write whatever comes to mind, without censoring yourself. At the end of the month, decide if you want to continue this writing process.

Psychology

- Most of us were engaged in the creative process through our play experiences during early childhood. You can learn about your own creative process by reflecting on those childhood experiences. Find a quiet, isolated place where you can think without interruption for at least an hour. Think deeply and recall the most pleasurable experiences of play during your pre-school and early elementary school years. Make a few notes describing these experiences. Then consider the structure of the play experiences you most enjoyed. Did you like best repetitive movement such as swinging or jumping rope? ball games and other sports? pretend and fantasy games you made up yourself? Next, examine the work processes and study areas you enjoy the most. Is there any correspondence between the structure of the work activities you most enjoy and your favorite kind of childhood play? How might this kind of reflection and

self-knowledge help you choose a career?

- The creative process has been the subject of a great deal of study and research. Consult some of the reference resources on this topic and identify some of the ideas psychologists and psychotherapists have about the creative process and the personality traits of creative people.

History and Politics

- Almost any historical event can be researched and written about from a new and original perspective. Stephen Ambrose has written a whole collection of books on World War II as well as two books on the Lewis and Clark expedition. Use the Internet or a library to identify and read reviews on his works. What are the characteristics of his topics, titles, and approaches to history that make him such a popular writer in this genre?
- Select an event that is notable in importance to your family, your school, or your home town. You might choose your own birth, the opening of your school, or the erection of an important building in your town. Plan a short historical sketch on this event. Research the event by using the processes and resources historians rely on: newspaper accounts, photographs and videos, interviews with first-hand participants, interviews with second-hand observers, imaginary re-dramatizations of the event in your own mind, analyses of the persons who participated in the event, written sources about the event. Compose your historical sketch, and ask others who were involved in this event to assess your historical accuracy and perception.
- Read selections from Alan K. Simpson's *Right in the Old Gazoo: A Lifetime of Scrapping with the Press* and summarize the problems a politician faces as a result of his public role.

Media and Technology

- George Lucas argues that his script writing for a film is a process of imagining characters, who are representatives of parts of himself, and then allowing those characters to realize themselves--even if they take a direction different from his intentions. Watch a film that you like very much and select a scene that you think is particularly well done. Notice the positions of the characters on the screen, the background setting, the camera angles, and the lighting. Next, choose three characters for your scene, select a

subject for a dialogue, and write a description of their positions on the screen, the background setting, the camera angles, and the lighting. Use free writing and let each character speak in a dialogue. Try not to censor your writing, but let the characters act as they wish and say what they wish to say.

- Beginning in the late fall of 1998, a number of different versions of electronic books came on the market. These small, hand-held computers are used only for reading the text of a book and each one will hold up to ten book-length works. The texts can be purchased over the Internet, downloaded, and read a page at a time from the screen. The light on the screen can be adjusted so that the electronic book can be used comfortably in a dark airplane or lying on a sunny beach. Use the Internet to look at samples of these electronic books. Think about the comments at the end of the panelists' discussion on the ongoing life of books in the age of technology. Do you agree or disagree with their views?

Current Event Exploration (Web Lesson)

Women as Public Leaders

In February, 1999 Elizabeth Dole spoke to the Chamber of Commerce in Manchester, New Hampshire, a traditional first step in declaring entry into the presidential race. This potential that a woman might run for the American presidency in 2000 was the impetus for *Parade* magazine's February cover story on the importance of individual women as national and world leaders. Not only in politics but also in literature, women are achieving wide-spread recognition. The unusual achievements of Rita Dove as a poet laureate and Amy Tan as the author of *The Joy Luck Club*, popular both as a novel and a film, exemplify the new status of women as writers in American society.

In this lesson, you will explore the Web to discover women who play important roles in contemporary American society because of their positions in political life or their contributions as writers.

Questions for Exploration

What are the character traits, personal values, and achievements that characterize outstanding women leaders in politics and literature? Must a woman adhere to gender stereotypes in order to be a successful public figure? Do

stereotypes in order to be a successful public figure? Do different social rules apply to women in politics and women writers?

Procedure

1. In order to answer the "Questions for Exploration," you will need to collect information about some important women politicians and writers and explore their character traits, values, and achievements. You will also need to assess their position in American society and decide if their life choices and self-presentations indicate an adherence to stereotypical gender roles. You may recognize many of the women in politics, and you may have already formed opinions about their public image. You can also search newspaper and periodical articles, take notes on news reports and talk shows that feature information about them, or explore the web sites provided. You might also recognize many of the women writers listed, and you may have read some of their works. In addition to the web sites provided, look for book reviews of their works and magazine articles about them, and read from their works. Make notes on each resource you use and keep a record of your sources, using correct documentation conventions. For web resources include both the official name of the web site and the URL address.

Research outstanding women in contemporary American politics:

- Elizabeth Dole, prospective presidential candidate, 2000 election
- Hillary Rodham-Clinton, current First Lady, prospective Senate candidate, 2000 election
- Kay Bailey Hutchison, Senator from Texas
- Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, Senators from California
- Olympia Snowe, Senator from Maine

Research outstanding, contemporary American women writers:

African American Writers

- Maya Angelou
- Rita Dove
- Toni Morrison

- - Alice Walker

Asian American Writers

- Maxine Hong Kingston
- Amy Tan

1. Synthesize the information you collect and develop a response to the "Questions for Exploration." The format for your response (written, oral, web page, etc.) will be decided by your teacher.

Suggested Web sites:

Politics

Clinton, Hillary Rodham. [First Ladies Biographies: Hillary Rodham Clinton](#); [The First Lady of the United States](#); [Hillary Clinton Forum](#): Supporting Hillary Clinton for President Since 1995; and ["Save America's Treasures Tour"](#)

Dole, Elizabeth. [Say Yes, Elizabeth](#); [Draft Elizabeth Dole 2000](#); and [Dole for President](#)

Boxer, Barbara. [United States Senator Barbara Boxer](#)

Feinstein, Dianne. [United States Senator Dianne Feinstein](#)

Hutchison, Kay Bailey. [United States Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison](#)

Snowe, Olympia. [United States Senator Olympia Snowe](#)

Writing

Angelou, Maya. [Maya Angelou Pages](#) and [Maya Angelou](#)

Dove, Rita. [Rita Dove: Vita](#); [The Circle Association's Rita Dove Page](#); [Lady Freedom Among Us](#)

Kingston, Maxine Hong. [Celebrating Women's History: Maxine Hong Kingston](#)

Morrison, Toni. [Anniina's Toni Morrison Page](#) and [The Nobel Prize Internet Archive: Toni Morrison](#)

Tan, Amy. [Anniina's Amy Tan Page](#); [The Salon Interview: Amy Tan](#)

Walker, Alice. [Anniina's Alice Walker Page](#); [Alice Walker: Womanist Writer](#); [Voices From the Gaps: Alice Walker](#)

Women Writers Resource: [A Celebration of Women Writers](#)

Program Guests Continued



[George Lucas](#)

Entertainment Industry
Executive

"If somebody gave me a hundred feet of film, I made a movie out of it," George Lucas likes to say. When Lucas was attending USC Film School he didn't even need a hundred feet. While still a student, he turned 32 feet of 16 millimeter film into a one-minute animated short that not only won awards at festivals nationwide, but revolutionized animated films. And he's been revolutionizing film ever since. Raised on a walnut ranch in Modesto, California, the son of a stationery store owner, George Lucas has created many of the most popular films in motion picture history, starting in 1971 with *American Graffiti* with its five Academy Award nominations. But it wasn't until he wrote and directed *Star Wars* in 1977, that box office records were rewritten. The *Indiana Jones* films came next, securing more Oscars and transporting millions of fans to a world of high adventure and heroics, as well as becoming the basis for the award-winning television series *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*.

LucasFilm Ltd., the company he formed in 1971, has evolved into multiple companies responsible for many industry innovations.

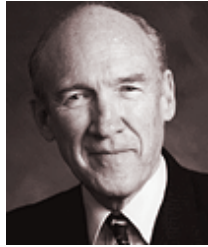
The parent company handles all feature film and television production and distribution, as well as the business activities of THX and Licensing. THX, the division dedicated to ensuring excellence of film presentation, has changed the way people listen to films in movie theaters and at home. LucasArts Entertainment Company is a leading international developer of entertainment software. Lucas Digital Ltd., comprising Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) and Skywalker Sound, is the leading visual effects and post-production company in the industry.

No man comes as close to representing the art, technology, and business of the movie industry as George Lucas. His work was honored in 1992 by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences with the Irving G. Thalberg Life Achievement Award.

Carol Shields
Pulitzer Prize for Fiction



Carol Shields is an internationally acclaimed author of novels, plays, stories, and poetry and currently serves as Professor of English at the University of Manitoba. At age 28, as the mother of three, she opened *The Feminine Mystique* and was thrilled by the revelation that there were new options for women. This inspired her to enter a young writers competition and won. The success gave her the confidence to trust that her voice was worth hearing. She then burst out of the Canadian plains with *The Stone Diaries*, a shimmering evocation of a woman's life written in heart-stopping beautiful prose. Her genius for exploring the emotional landscape and domestic travails has earned her many high honors, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Governor General's Award (her native Canada's top literary honor), and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.



The Honorable Alan K. Simpson Legendary Political Career

Alan Simpson is a Visiting Lecturer at the John F. Kennedy School of Government and beloved former United States Senator from Cody, Wyoming. A graduate of the University of Wyoming Law School, he served for ten years as Cody's City Attorney. He began his political career in 1964 when he was elected to the Wyoming State Legislature serving for 13 years and holding the office of Majority Floor Leader. Later he was elected to the U.S. Senate and became Party Whip. Simpson was responsible for many pieces of legislation, including the Clean Air Act of 1990. This respected legislator recently concluded his distinguished 32-year career in public service, where he repeatedly demonstrated the qualities of keen intelligence and independent thinking, serving as a beacon of high integrity "helping make politics a noble calling."

A member of a political family, his father served both as Governor of Wyoming from 1954 to 1958, and as United States Senator from Wyoming from 1962 to 1966. Al chose to follow in his father's footsteps and began his own political career in 1964 when he was elected to the Wyoming State Legislature as a state representative of his native Park County. He served the next 13 years in the Wyoming House of Representatives, holding the offices of Majority Whip, Majority Floor Leader and Speaker Pro-Tem. In 1978, Al ran for, and was elected to, the United States Senate. After a successful first term, he was reelected in 1984 with 78 percent of the vote and then again in 1990 to a third term. Following his first term in the Senate, Al was elected by his peers to the position of the Assistant Majority Leader in 1984 and served in that capacity until 1994. He completed his final term on January 2

He completed his final term on January 3, 1997.

In January of 1998, Al was appointed director of the Institute of Politics at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He will serve in that capacity until June 1, 1999.

Amy Tan
Best-selling Novelist



One of the nation's leading authors, Amy Tan was always inspired to write. This literary star-to-be was born in Oakland, in a home shared with her two brothers and three half-sisters from her mother's former marriage in China. When her father and a brother died of brain tumors within a year of each other, Tan's mother sent her to high school in Switzerland. She went on to earn her master's degree in linguistics, but supported herself as a switchboard operator, A&W carhop, bartender and pizza maker, copywriter, and creator of love horoscopes for a pay-phone service.

Tan's career as a novelist began with her mother's heart attack when she vowed to learn more about her mother's life. She turned to her heritage and "discovered her literary voice" authoring her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. The result was a 30 week best-seller translated into 23 languages. While critics swooned over Tan's delicately crafted, vividly intricate style, her career started somewhat more prosaically as a free-lance business writer for IBM. Eventually, Tan got fed up being a hired gun. "I had to write something that meant something to me," she says. The result was *The Joy Luck Club*, a novel of modern Chinese-American women and their more tradition-bound mothers. She's followed her first success with *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*, a gentle, spirit-filled story inspired by a belief in the

spiritual story, inspired by a belief in the supernatural.