

Sherlock Holmes and the Mystery of Minutiae

By Brandon Carter

Jan Stauber Grant Report 2017-18

Introduction to College Writing (ELA 4)

Bayless School District

St. Louis, MO

Like all Holmes stories, it began with a mystery. Students entered the classroom on a dreary, grey day ready to attend another dreary, boring English class. They entered the classroom hesitantly, for their teacher was missing. As they surveyed the room, they noticed a black box sitting on the center table. The hard plastic container was no larger than a backpack. It was reinforced with metal ribs and secured by a large hasp. Four coded locks further secured the contents. Nearby sat a letter with an incomplete address. Its contents held a clue...

Contextual Information:

In the small suburb of St. Louis County there is a gem of a school. It shines with a special and unique beauty. For within the walls of the school, the diversity is embraced, and the traditional narrative is broken. The district is home to many students who are immigrants, refugees, and first generation American citizens. Twenty-two different languages are spoken in homes of district families. Nearly seventy percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. And the school population only continues to grow. Within the school diversity is expected, students are inclusive, and character is shown through respect and responsibility.

Seventy-six percent of students who graduate from Bayless High school will go on to attend a two- or four-year college. Many of these students are the first in their families to attend such institutions in pursuit of college degrees. Therefore, it is vital that the school prepare students to be successful in such pursuits: especially due to the limited economic opportunities afforded to these students. In assessment of our programs, we found that students were underprepared for the rigors college-level writing. In part, language barriers many of the students carry with them affect their preparation for college. Although many no longer qualify for ESL services by the time they are seniors, language gaps delayed opportunities for students to prepare for post-secondary writing. Because of partnership with St. Louis Community College, Bayless

High School and I developed the Introduction to College Writing course, which replaced the traditional senior English class. The course focuses intensely on improving writing and speaking in a variety of capacities in preparation for college and career literacy. The course's adaptive nature allows the instructor to alter the writing skill of focus while using a variety of textual resources (such as the **Adventures of Sherlock Holmes** for instance).

Assignment/Objective:

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's works of Sherlock Holmes served as the guiding texts for a unit focusing on the finer details of writing. Prior to the unit, it was observed that students were working toward stronger paragraph organization and greater clarity in ideas; however, they lacked in specific supporting details, and needed to be pushed toward varied style and more precise language.

Over the course of the nine-week unit, the students read at least three Sherlock Holmes stories while analyzing the writing style of Doyle. All the while, students explored Holmes' character and influence through the researching of sources and consumption of popular culture. Ultimately, students would synthesize their own ideas into a thesis-driven essay (Appendix A). In this essay, students were welcome to take a variety of approaches in the creation of a strong thesis statement. Students then supported the statement with specific evidence making use of examples and illustrations to uphold their arguments.

The primary objective for the unit was for students to produce a specific thesis statement and to support that thesis statement with textual evidence and observed examples. In revision of the essays, the students were to pay particular attention to the word choice and sentence structure: the minutiae of the essay. All of these objectives support the assessed need for specific evidence, refined word choice, and attention to detail.

Rationale:

Ask a secondary English teacher today, and they will probably tell you that one of the biggest obstacles is actually getting students to read. Whether it is a matter of interest, access, or understanding, students describe reading as boring or a burden. As a result, some students turn to the internet for summaries while many attempt to get by without reading. I am happy to report that many of my students enjoyed reading the stories with some even admitting that this was the

first required reading they had completed in years. I had a number of students choose to read more than the required minimum with a couple who even read the entire Canon over the course of the school year. By incorporating student choice in the **Adventures** they read and offering choices in the reading methods, students were more likely to be invested in their choices, and therefore, more likely to actually read the text. Secondly, the fact that these texts are available in the common domain allowed for ease of access to digital copies and audio versions of the text. Thirdly, because students had some familiarity with the character, they were more likely to read his adventures. Finally, by comparing the stories to popular culture that students were already consuming, interest in the character continued to grow.

As students read the texts, they tracked key clues and plot elements. Upon completion of a story, students composed detailed summaries of the adventures they read. In these summaries, they included character notes, plot points, and descriptions of key clues. This activity helped students to analyze, summarize, and synthesize their thoughts on the stories, and also served as notes for the thesis-driven essay they would later compose. Additionally, this activity further encouraged students to read because they were required to provide such detail that may not be available in online summaries.

This unit also offered an opportunity to discuss the subtleties of writing. With an objective focused on observation of specific details, who better to use as a model than Sherlock Holmes! Through analysis of Doyle's writing, we were able to discuss elements such as word choice and sentence structure. Through the Copy Change Activity (Appendix) students practiced using new vocabulary and different sentence structures. Later during revision of their essays, students practiced identification of specific sentences and made distinct changes in sentence structure and word choice. In revision, we acted as Editor Holmes: a character designed to identify even the smallest of errors in an essay. All of these activities reinforced the writing skills we were practicing with this unit.

Process/Sequence:

Breakout EDU: (Appendix B)

The unit began with an activity designed to increase initial interest, build basic background, and cultivate classroom culture. At the beginning of the class period, students received a locked box, a cryptograph, and a cypher. Using the primary and supporting texts we

purchased through the grant, students followed a number of clues and red herrings, which helped them to unlock the four coded locks. Students searched around the room for the books that could help them answer the questions. They learned how to use a cypher and worked with clues and reasoning to solve the cryptograph. This was a difficult task, but three of four classes completed the challenge in the given class period. Overall, it was a great activity for inspiring interest, building background knowledge, and familiarizing students with the classroom resources.

Introduction to Sherlock Holmes:

Now that students were excited to work with this character, we continued with the unit through an introduction to Sherlock Holmes. Over the course of two class periods, we researched and discussed background information that would be most useful and relevant to the unit. In addition to studying Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, historical context, and the character himself, we worked to identify key aspects of the mystery genre, and we looked at some of the ways that Doyle's work inspired many others. At this point, students began consuming direct adaptations and other works in the mystery/thriller genre.

As a group, we read "Silver Blaze" and began to analyze plot and character details. By modeling the process of analysis and summary of one of the Adventures, students had a clearer understanding of their expectations for their individual reading (Appendix C). Furthermore, we closely analyzed Doyle's word choice and sentence structures through the Copy Change activity (Appendix D).

Creating Thesis Statements and Composing Essays:

Over the course of the next couple of weeks, students read many of the **Adventures of Sherlock Holmes**. Students had the opportunity to choose which stories they wanted to read. Many formed reading groups, which allowed them to discuss the stories they were reading and clues that they found. Others formed watching groups that met outside of class to watch other mystery-thrillers that they might use as secondary sources for their essays. As students continued to read, they narrowed their topics and practiced writing thesis statements.

After developing thesis statements, students got to work drafting, revising, and editing essays. Throughout the writing process, students presented their findings to their peers. There was a variety of incredibly creative essay topics. Many students compared these adventures to

many of the modern TV crime dramas (such as *Criminal Minds*, *NCIS*, *Psych*, *Law & Order*, and many more). Others took a historical approach: providing historical context from Doyle's own life or discussing the history of detective work. Some looked for truer adaptations of Doyle's characters and stories through movies or TV shows featuring Sherlock Holmes. Finally, some students took incredibly creative approaches to their essays. One student looked at Holmes' use of forensic science. Another chose to diagnose Sherlock and Watson according to the DSM-V. Still another compared Sherlock Holmes to Christopher from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*.

Result:

As far as the writing was concerned, students did an excellent job of meeting the unit objectives. In their year-end reflection, many pointed to this unit and this essay as their favorite unit and strongest piece of writing. For me, it was fun to see students engaging in the text and applying their learning. I have a personal fascination with the character of Sherlock Holmes. At first, I was nervous that the language and age of Doyle's works would be a barrier to student interest, but the students surprised me. In fact, many reported that this was their favorite required reading of their entire high school careers. As I mentioned before, many went beyond the minimum requirements reading extra stories or novels purely for interest. I was glad to see that they were truly connecting with these characters and stories. It was important for them to see the cultural relevance of Doyle's 130 year-old work. The unit was a resounding success, and I hope to continue with the unit in years to come.

Thank You:

Thank you, Beacon Society, for providing such an opportunity for these students. The Jan Stauber Grant truly helped to make this unit a memorable one for students who may have never experienced Doyle's works. In that regard, the grant's mission was also a resounding success. Thank you!

Appendix A – Essay Assignment

Sherlock Holmes Midterm Assignment

Introduction:

We surveyed 100 people. Top three answers on the board. Name a famous detective. Survey says... Now if your answer wasn't Sherlock Holmes, either you don't understand how Family Feud works, or you're out of touch with canonical pop culture. 130 years after his character was first penned into existence by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes is still the most famous and most well-known detective. His power of deduction and intense focus on minute details have led his character to be re-thought, and his stories to be re-told over and over again. Whether he is reborn as himself, is reincarnated into a different character, or is even subtly referenced through seemingly trivial detail, the character of Sherlock Holmes has had a profound impact on the mystery and thriller genres.

Assignment:

You have had the opportunity recognize and analyze some aspect of the character of Sherlock Holmes and the elements of the detective genre. Each of you has now read at least three Sherlock Holmes short stories. Many of you of you have also recently consumed a work that adapts the character or story. You had a chance to summarize these texts, identify specific clues within these cases, and reflect on your understanding of and reaction to Sherlock Holmes. We will now take what we have learned, and write a short (~3 page) synthesis essay.

Requirements:

- A clear and concise thesis statement.
- 2-3 body paragraphs that support the thesis statement.
- At least 3 specifically referenced examples from Doyle's original work
 - These do not necessarily need to be quotes, but should be specific references to specific works
 - If using an additional source (i.e. *Sherlock* episode), you should include at least one specific example from that source
- An introductory paragraph that introduces your topic and thesis to your audience
- A conclusion paragraph that wraps up your assignment
- At least 2 annotated bibliography entries with MLA cited works and summaries of the stories
 - You already did these, but you may take the opportunity to revise
 - Any revisions should be marked with **bold font**

Suggested Topics and Thesis Statements:

- Compare the stories you read to an alternative telling of the story.
 - While set in different time periods, the BBC’s “Sign of the Three” episode of *Sherlock* is an effective retelling of Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four*. The former adequately adapts Sherlock Holmes’ character, the relationship between Holmes and Watson, and the details of the novel’s case.
- Recognize another “modern day” Sherlock Holmes.
 - Christopher, the extraordinary fifteen-year-old from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, is a modern-day Sherlock Holmes. The unique perspective of the novel offers readers a glimpse of what it might be like in the mind of Holmes himself.
 - Dr. Gregory House from the TV show *House* is a modern medical Sherlock Holmes.
 - Though Sherlock Holmes is often viewed as a hero, and Hannibal Lecter, a villain, the two characters display true power of deduction that may be too similar to overlook. Both characters show attention to minute details, prefer logic to the clouding of emotion, and exhibit psychopathic tendencies.
- Who are you more like, or who would you rather be?
 - While I am often seen by others as a Sherlock Holmes, I would far prefer to be like Dr. John Watson.
 - Though Holmes is brilliant and admired, I identify more with Dr. Watson because...
- What character traits help Sherlock Holmes to be most successful?
 - Sherlock Holmes’ knowledge of himself, emotional detachment, logical reasoning, and careful attention to specific detail help to make him a successful detective.
- Another topic of your choosing:
 - Diagnose Sherlock Holmes using the DSM-V
 - Discuss why Holmes remains culturally relevant today
 - Research the origins of Sherlock Holmes, and discuss what influenced Doyle to create this character
 - Discuss the effect of having Dr. John Watson serve as the narrator in Holmes stories
 - How are female and/or minority character represented in Sherlock Holmes stories?
 - Is Sherlock Holmes really trying to help people?

Purpose and Rationale:

The ability to make connections between two similar or better yet, two dissimilar concepts is where true learning and intelligence lies. Science, business, engineering and management all effectively use reapplication. When we notice something successful and are able to apply it in a different area, we are able to build upon what is good without having to reinvent from scratch. Furthermore, comparative analysis allows us to think outside of preconceived possibility and challenges us to find and focus on what is similar. In our world, now more than ever, we need that ability to see and strengthen similarities.

If you don’t buy into the idea that this essay can help you with that skill, then if nothing more, this essay will help you to better articulate complex thoughts and ideas.

Each body paragraph should use the following structure:

- First sentence: Provide transition and state the connection/element being discussed.
- Supporting sentences: Present an example or examples from the stories that support the main idea of the paragraph.
- Commentary: Further discuss the examples and support your thesis statement
- Last sentence: Wrap up the discussion of this element.

An effective analysis essay will have the following characteristics:

- A narrowed scope and a clear sense of purpose and focus
- Background information that includes at least the titles, basic plots, and authors
- A clearly identifiable thesis
- Topic sentences that present the main points of each paragraph
- Appropriate evidence--examples and information from the sources
- A connection about how the evidence supports the thesis
- An organizational structure appropriate to purpose, audience, and context
- Academic language and style appropriate to the audience and context
- Proper mechanics (spelling, grammar, punctuation)

Grading Rubric

Focus—scope and purpose of essay

Points Awarded	Explanation of Standard
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An effective introduction and conclusion are provided that relate to the essay’s topic and writer’s perspective. ▪ The thesis clearly reflects the essay’s focus and purpose to create a framework for the discussion. ▪ The essay does not contain unnecessary words/phrases or irrelevant information.

Unity and Coherence—connection of ideas, sentences, and paragraphs

Points Awarded	Explanation of Standard
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The essay effectively exhibits a clear organizational strategy. ▪ Paragraphs provide logical transitional words and phrases. ▪ Transitional words and phrases are thoughtfully used between sentences when appropriate. ▪ Ideas connect in a reasonable manner. ▪ Paragraph breaks are effectively used.

Content—development and support of discussion

Points Awarded	Explanation of Standard
25	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Relevant and meaningful background information is provided about the topic.▪ A clearly identifiable thesis is established that relates to the assignment.▪ Strong topic sentences present the main points of the writer’s discussion.▪ Powerful evidence is used to support the writer’s perspective.▪ Effective connections are drawn about how the evidence supports the thesis.

Clarity—development of writing style, word choice, conciseness, and directness

Points Awarded	Explanation of Standard
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The writing presents sophistication of usage and syntax.▪ Sentences are clear and understandable.▪ The writing has strong academic language appropriate to the college level.▪ Sentences are varied in pattern, from simple to complex.

Mechanics—spelling, grammar, and punctuation

Points Awarded	Explanation of Standard
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The essay contains proper punctuation, grammar, and/or spelling.▪ Any errors do not weaken the discussion and/or impede meaning.▪ There are no more than 3 errors per page.

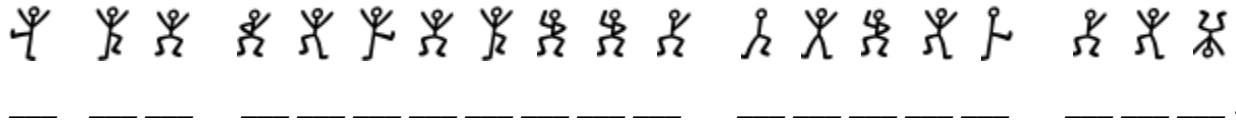
MLA Citations and Annotated Bibliography

Points Awarded	Explanation of Standard
40	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Essay follows MLA style for formatting header, essay, and works cited.▪ At least two stories are cited and summarized in an annotated bibliography▪ Annotations adequately summarize selected Sherlock Holmes stories and include specific clues that helped Holmes to solve the case.

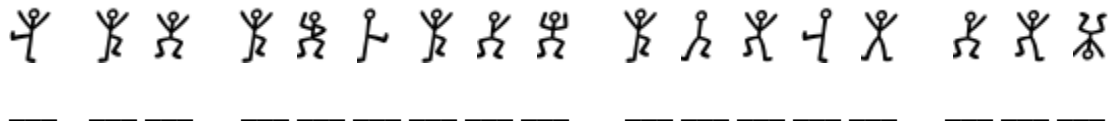
Appendix B – Breakout EDU Resources

5-letter word clue: students use other clues to solve the Dancing Men

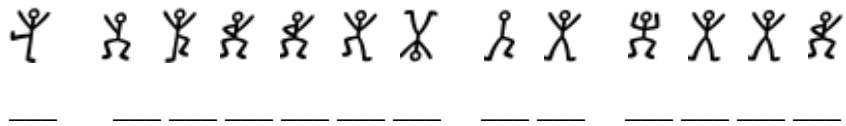
I am a five-letter word.



If you remove my first letter,



If you remove my first and second letters,



What am I?

Decoded:

I am a five-letter word.

I am normally below you.

If you remove my first letter, I am always above you.

If you remove my first and second letters, I cannot be seen.

What am I?

C-H-A-I-R

4 digit clue: Book-marked page in the gilded copy: "Silver Blaze" – "curious incident..."

In the gilded copy, Mark the column break. He borrowed that quote for his own piece of work.

X Y X Y Z Y X Z I Y Z X

Z Y Z Z X Z I Y X Z X Z X Z X

In the gilded copy, Mark the column break. He borrowed that quote for his own piece of work.

Decoded: The highest prime Christopher knows.

7-0-5-7

5 digit color lock: Complete Works Table of Contents

Find the Contents of all of his adventures.

Z X Z Z X Z X Z Y Z Y X Z X Z

Find the Contents of all of his adventures.

Let the colors guide you.

Red-Orange-Blue-Silver-Yellow

Decoding clues: Use the supporting books at your disposal to answer the following questions.
The answers will help you to solve the dancing men code.

In what field was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle trained?

⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈

What modern character from a medical TV drama is a clear nod to Sherlock Holmes?

⋈ ⋈ . ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈

Which famous illusionist was a contemporary and unlikely companion of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle?

⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈

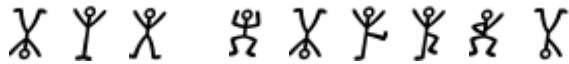
Reference London's Map to find the street and place of the British Museum. The name should be familiar to those who have studied some Shakespeare.

⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈ ⋈

It's amazing what we can learn from the private communication between two people. After visiting this site in 1893, Doyle published "The Final Problem." "Killed Holmes" is all he scribbled in his notebook. This site was the location of his death.



The many adventures of Sherlock Holmes were published in this magazine.



Medicine
Dr. House
Houdini
Montague
Richenbach Falls
The Strand

Dancing Men Key:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M

N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Dancing Men Key:

Key location clue: attach key to the back of wedding photo placed next to son's birth announcement in the classroom. Students must use *The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes* to find the worded clues. Put the words in letter order to reveal clue.

What's the big idea? Shall I explain more simply?

Learn to decode as Holmes did in the novel, *The Valley of Fear*.

The man who created Sherlock Holmes will help your clues appear.

Q-D-F-U-W-V ... W-H-T-S-O ... S-A-B-L-G ... C-K-R ... P-N-M ... W-E-G

459 P2L1W10 P3L2W6 P3L5W14

A, B, C

431 P1L2W10 P3L3W4

D, E

421 P1L1W4 P3L2W3 P4L7W5

F, G, H

378 P3L5W5

I

358 P5L1W5

J

Q-D-F-U-W-V ... W-H-T-S-O ... S-A-B-L-G ... C-K-R ... P-N-M ... W-E-G

325 P1L1W3 P3L2W9

K, L

302 P2L11W6 P3L15W11

M, N

301 P2L14W4

O

246 P2L1W9 P2L8W11 P4L5W11

P, Q, R

242 P2L5W5 P4L1W8

S, T

115 P1L8W11 P2L5W11 P3L10W2

U, V, W

Decoded: Something was different in the room. The teacher had a son. A printed record along side. Husband and wife. Memoirs of marriage. The back side.

- A. 459P2L1W10 - printed
- B. 459P3L2W6 - record
- C. 459P3L5W14 – husband

- D. 431P1L2W10 – was
- E. 431P3L3W4 – back

- F. 421P1L1W4 – different
- G. 421P3L2W3 – side
- H. 421P4L7W5 – teacher
- I. 378P3L5W5 – between

- J. 358P5L1W5 – after

- K. 325P1L1W3 – and
- L. 325P3L2W9 – along

- M. 302P2L11W6 – marriage
- N. 302P3L15W11 – of
- O. 301P2L14W4 – son

- P. 246P2L1W9 – memoirs
- Q. 246P2L8W11 – something
- R. 246P4L5W11 – wife

- S. 242P2L5W5 – a
- T. 242P4L1W8 – had

- U. 115P1L8W11 – in
- V. 115P2L5W11 – room
- W. 115P3L10W2 – the

+5 POINTS:

**THIS COUPON AWARDS 5 EXTRA
POINTS TO _____
ON _____
ASSIGNMENT FOR THE
SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE
SHERLOCK HOLMES TRAINING
ACTIVITY.**



+5 POINTS:

**THIS COUPON AWARDS 5 EXTRA
POINTS TO _____
ON _____
ASSIGNMENT FOR THE
SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE
SHERLOCK HOLMES TRAINING
ACTIVITY.**



+5 POINTS:

**THIS COUPON AWARDS 5 EXTRA
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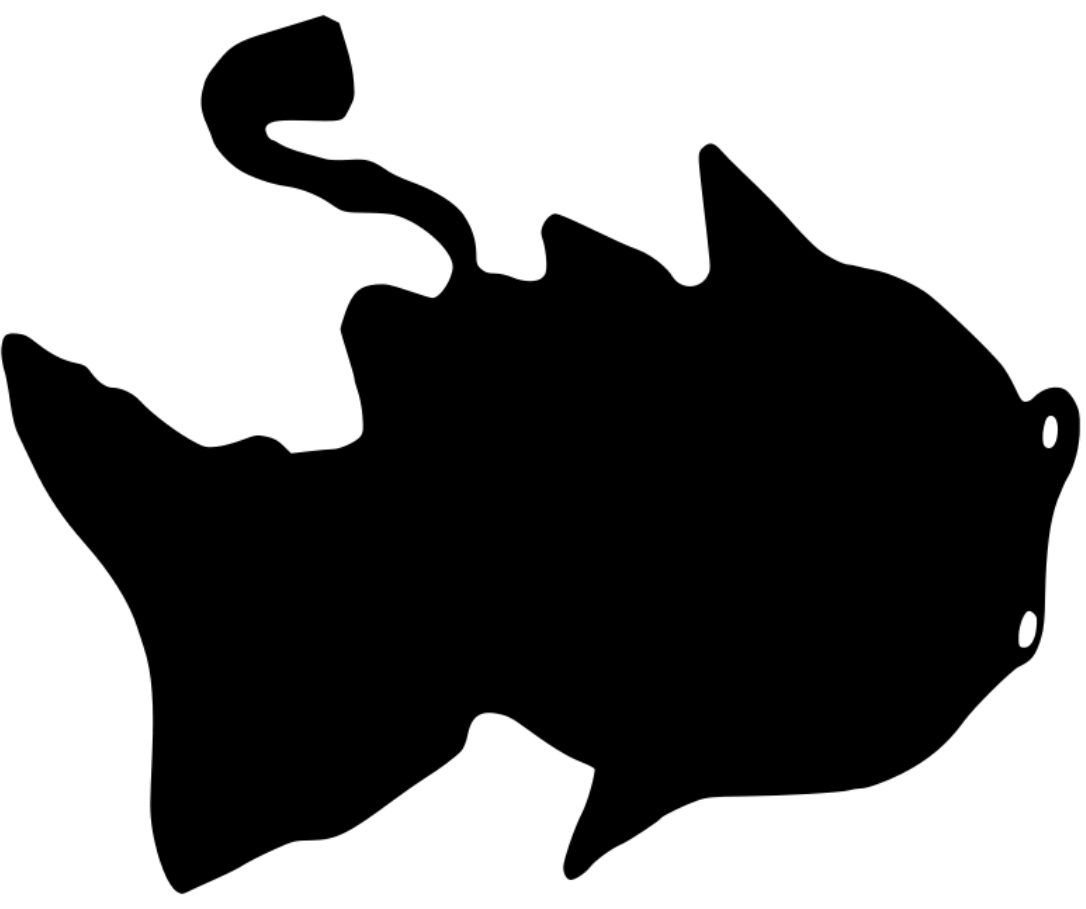


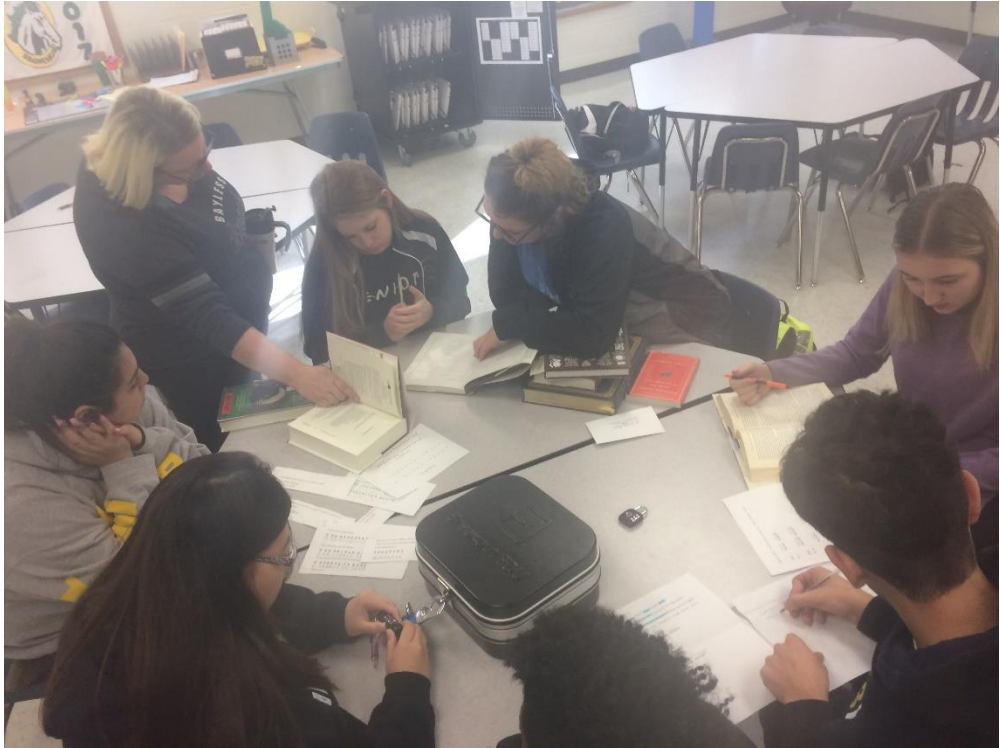
+5 POINTS:

**THIS COUPON AWARDS 5 EXTRA
POINTS TO _____
ON _____
ASSIGNMENT FOR THE
SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE
SHERLOCK HOLMES TRAINING
ACTIVITY.**



**WE
PASSED
THEM
THEST!**







Key Clues:

In two short paragraphs (~4-7 sentences each), identify a specific clue and discuss how that clue helped Holmes to solve the case. Overly vague clues or explanations will receive partial credit.

Reflection/Reaction:

Appendix D: Copy Change Activity

ELA IV – Sherlock Holmes

Name:

Copy Change

As we study Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's collection of stories, we are also learning about his writing style. In order to work on becoming better writers, we will use her sentences as a framework and do what is called a **copy change**.

A **copy change** keeps the original sentence structure the same, but changes the detail words to create a totally new meaning. It serves the function of giving the apprentice writer a model, but still lets the apprentice writer toy with words and meaning.

Sample

Doyle's original sentence:

"You have a grand gift for silence, Watson. It makes you quite invaluable as a companion."

Copy Change:

You have a strong attention for detail, Ernie. It makes you incredibly talented as a writer.

*Go back and **underline** the words in the original sentence that were changed to help you see the transformation.

***HINT:** To create a successful **copy change**, you must decide what your new sentence will say **before** you begin changing the words.

Practice Underline the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in each sentence. *Change the underlined words to create a new sentence with an entirely new meaning.* Even if you can't replace each word, it should be clear that your sentence was inspired by the structure of the original.

1. "There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact."

2. "What you do in this world is a matter of no consequence. The question is what you can make people believe you have done."

3. "How often have I said to you that when you eliminated the impossible, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

4. "I am the most incurably lazy devil that ever stood in shoe leather."

Include four more of your own sentences that you have collected. You should use a simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentence.

1. simple

Original -

Copy-change -

2. compound

Original -

Copy-change -

3. complex

Original -

Copy-change -

4. compound-complex

Original -

Copy-change -

Choose two of the Copy-changes and re-write those sentences again using a different sentence structure to convey the same meaning.