Many students seem convinced that authors make literature difficult on purpose. When texts aren’t immediately accessible, students often turn away from the novel complaining, “It’s boring!” Teachers know they should teach in Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and aim instruction at a level where students learn with the help of a teacher or more knowledgeable peers, but surrounded by a sea of complaints, we revise the curriculum downward. Given half a chance, students work in what I call the ZME or Zone of Minimal Effort.

In this instructional zone, the texts are as short as possible—and, if possible, humorous; every day’s lesson stands alone so as not to rely on students doing homework reading; and teachers do most of the reading aloud. While I understand how student absences and the lack of enabling skills cause teachers to work in this Zone of Minimal Effort, we need to recognize that under such conditions, reading skills do not improve. While seemingly responsive to student needs, in fact this kind of instruction leaves students who are already working below grade level farther and farther behind.

Instead of giving in to student complaints, I try to teach students how to navigate difficult text. The elements of literature provide readers with the tools they need for this navigation. Plot and structure, character, setting, point of view, style and language, symbol, and theme are the building blocks of fiction. They work together to convey meaning. When my students tell me that they hate a story, what they sometimes are really saying is that they don’t understand what they read. It is my job to help them suspend judgment until they see how the elements of the piece converge.

For the sake of example, let’s consider Jack London’s The Call of the Wild. London’s works often deal with elemental struggle for survival—a subject all young people, however urban, can relate to. He wrote in a naturalistic style, presenting the harsh realities of the world without moral judgement. The Call of the Wild is the story of a sled-dog, Buck, during the time of the Alaskan gold rush. Kidnapped from his comfortable home and exposed to the arctic wilderness, Buck finds that his primitive instincts are awakened. Buck serves his various Alaskan masters dutifully, even those who abuse him. When John Thornton rescues Buck from a group of incompetent miners, Buck learns about loyalty and love. With John’s death, Buck answers the call of the wild, severing his connection to humanity and joining his brother wolves.

One of the most interesting elements of this novel is its point of view. Told in the third person singular, the tale is Buck’s story. Readers can only see, hear, or know what Buck sees, hears, and knows. This differs from a first person point of view in that the story is not told in Buck’s voice. No doubt the fact that Buck is a dog influenced London’s choice here. One effect of this use of the third person singular is that it allowed Lon-
don to demonstrate the folly of humans when seen through the eyes of an outside observer, in this case an intelligent dog.

Buck is the protagonist in this novel. It is he who changes throughout the course of the story and with whom the reader sympathizes. Buck does not progress in the same way a human character might, primarily because his goal is different. Most human protagonists move towards established norms in society or toward achievement—either material or spiritual. Buck moves away from society and back to the wild. “The call of the wild” is a metaphor for Buck’s desire to leave the world of human folly and return to the wolves. Taken literally, the call is the wolves crying at night. Symbolically, this call represents the call inside Buck’s blood and his longing for freedom in the wild. Though he had found a deep connection with a human through John Thornton, Buck was tired of being a pet. London also explores the irony that the dignity and virtue Buck exhibits even under duress should be so lacking in many of the story’s human characters.

Difficult, challenging texts like Call of the Wild offer young readers insight into the world. When teachers determine that the novel’s setting is too foreign or that the point of view too confusing, we short-change students. No, they may not be able to read this book without your help, but with critical attention to the elements of literature, students can begin to construct meaning. To do so, they will have to move outside their Zone of Minimal Effort. If you offer the scaffolding, in my experience they will thank you for making them work.

[EDITOR’S NOTE: I’d like to welcome Carol to the Voices from the Middle team. Carol brings her considerable expertise in literature instruction to us as she shares how to help students understand the literary elements authors use as they construct a text. Carol is the author of several books including With Rigor for All: Teaching the Classics to Contemporary Students (Heinemann, 2000).]

2004 NCTE Promising Young Writers Program for Eighth-Grade Students

Only students who are eighth graders in the academic year of 2003–04 may participate. Promising Young Writers brochures will automatically be mailed to all teachers whose students have entered the program previously. Entry information is also available on the Web at the following address: http://www.ncte.org/student_awards/. To request a brochure, write to Promising Young Writers Program, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; e-mail mloeschen@ncte.org; or call 1-800-369-6283 ext. 3608. Entries and fees must be received by January 16, 2004. The school name and mailing address must be included with each request.

NOTE: A $5.00 entry fee per student will be required with completed entry form and submission. This fee will help defray the costs of processing the entry.