

## Description of a Rigorous English 10 Course

In 1989 Luis Rodriguez published “Race’ Politics,” a poem that recounts a day in his childhood when he and his brother were beat up because they had crossed Alameda Street in Los Angeles, from Watts into the more affluent neighborhood South Gate. Four years later, in his memoir *Always Running*, Rodriguez published the story again. Like most literary texts, neither Rodriguez’s poem nor his narrative announces its purpose to readers. How Rodriguez’s twice-told story might be taught to a rigorous tenth-grade English class reveals much of what rigor means in English Language Arts.

A study of “Race’ Politics” and *Always Running* in a rigorous English 10 course might begin by asking students to reflect on what they already know about Rodriguez or about racial tension in Los Angeles. Then students would be encouraged to explore both texts on their own—allowed, for example, to discover that the poem and the anecdote tell the same story. The study of Rodriguez’s work begins in the spirit of investigation that is the foundation of learning. From such initial investigations a rigorous course moves on, developing critical literacy by asking students to read and interpret increasingly complex texts. Mary Oliver’s “The Journey” is a short poem that introduces a theme of self-discovery; the first chapter of Richard Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy* develops and revises a similar theme; Herman Hesse’s novel *Siddhartha* explores the theme at length: to study these works in sequence is to introduce students to a series in which each text is more complex than the last. While their thematic similarities supply footholds that students can use to surmount initial misunderstandings, each text also presents students with its own unique challenges. For instance, the first chapter of *Black Boy* concludes with a series of 22 syntactically parallel sentences whose intent is ambiguous. After introducing the definition of parallelism, a teacher of a rigorous course might develop students’ understanding of the figure of speech by asking for conjectures about how the sentences both conclude the chapter and work together to express the book’s themes. The teacher might then ask students to brainstorm other ways that parallelism could be used in literature—a preview of *Siddhartha*’s parallel characters.

Just as important as the arrangement of texts is their variety. A rigorous English 10 course covers texts from a number of time periods and cultures and by a broad range of writers. Because the course’s reading list is broad, it focuses on introducing students to interpretive strategies that they can then use to develop deep understanding of any text they read. The course introduces students to Greek and Latin roots, suffixes, and prefixes; provides them with strategies for annotating significant ideas; coaches them to use context clues to understand difficult passages; and explores theories of literary criticism. Through strategies such as these a rigorous English 10 course helps students develop a repertoire of reading strategies, the makeup of literacy.

Moreover, because a rigorous English 10 course relies upon a scaffolding of knowledge and skills, the further students are in the course, the more sophisticated their interpretations will be. Therefore, what strategies students deploy in their initial investigation of “Race’ Politics” and *Always Running* will depend upon when in the academic year Rodriguez’s work falls in the syllabus. Whether it falls at the beginning of the year or the end, however, its exploration relies upon an essential question: “What defines poetry and prose?” It’s a question that cannot be wholly answered with characterizations of literary form. The metered lines of poetry or prose’s logical development of ideas marks a good starting point, an identification of difference, but does not fully encompass *poetry* or *prose*. Essential questions supply reason for student investigations to continue.