

The wisdom of seventh graders: Designing an elective course

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Raymond Chen

Last month, I spent a few hours reading essays written by seventh graders (ages 12 and 13) on the following subject:

Electives are often fun and different from our normal core classes. Imagine you have been chosen to create one new elective for our school. In a multi-paragraph essay, explain what the new elective would be like and what students would learn.

(Students were given two hours, plus one additional hour upon request.) Before I present you some of the responses, I'd like to take some time to address the students on the subject of writing. I know they won't read this, but I have to tell *someone*.

- Stay on prompt; in other words, make sure you address the assigned topic in its entirety. Don't get so carried away describing the class itself that you forget to explain what students would learn. Going off prompt is an automatic disqualification.
- Stay on mode; in other words, write the type of essay requested. This example demands an expository essay, not a persuasive one. You aren't trying to convince other students to take your elective. As with going off prompt, going off mode is an automatic disqualification.
- Do not introduce new material in your conclusion. Your conclusion is for tying your argument together; it's not a place for "oh, wait, I forgot something."
- Take it easy with the exclamation points! It's really distracting!
- Inside these questions there is often hidden another question, usually a *Why*. Here, the hidden question is "Why is it important that students learn that which this elective teaches?" Addressing the hidden question takes your essay to the next level. This tip is only for advanced writers; don't even consider addressing the hidden question until you can handle the explicit one!
- Mind your frame of reference. Don't start with *students* and then switch to *you*. Example of error (exaggerated): "Students who complete this class can show off to your friends." I'd say that over half of the essays made mistakes like this, though none so blatant.

- Mind your antecedents. When you use a pronoun, make sure the noun to which it refers is unambiguous. Example of error: “If teachers or anyone else hears insults, they will be thrown out of class.”
- I’m sure there are adjectives other than *cool* and *fun*. Try using them once in a while. It’s cool and fun.
- Many rules of writing can be broken, but don’t break a rule until you’ve first mastered it. Richard Wagner can write an orchestral prelude that consists of a single chord for over four minutes, but that’s because he’s Richard Wagner, and he knows what he’s doing.

What electives would seventh-graders design for themselves? Here are the ones from the essays that I read (plus some that other readers shared with me, marked with asterisks), broken down roughly into categories, and illustrated with selected sentences from those essays or closely-related essays.

- Sports and exercise
 - Skateboarding.
 - Fencing.
 - Cricket.
 - Soccer. The student explains that the problem with standard gym classes is that you don’t get to spend much time focusing on any one sport. “This class will have more variety than any other class.”
 - *Basketball. “Shooting is a exceedingly important part of basketball because if you didn’t score you would have no points. Shooting well helps your team’s chances of winning the game.”
 - *Swimming. This essay had an excellent introductory paragraph that ended with “We need more electives. We need variety. We need swimming.” It’s a joy to read from students who have such control of writing that they can explore rhetorical devices.
 - Paintballing [sic]. “There is not another elective where the goal is to shoot another student to win.” (How about photography?)
 - A single sport (chosen by the student).
 - Exercise for students who are overweight or have physical disabilities.
 - Weight training. It “strengthen strength.”
 - *Skydiving.

- Arts
 - Glass blowing.
 - Metal shop. (The school already offers woodworking.)
 - Drawing. “There is, quite literally, a fine line between a sketch of a drawing and the actual drawing.”
 - Cartooning.
 - Architecture.
 - Creative writing (2×).
 - *Rock music performance. “Would you rather be shreding (on the guitar) or playing Betovon.”
- Sciences
 - Electronics.
 - Material science.
 - *Writing video games. “Each kid would pay a fee of \$20 to pay some real progromers to teach the class for a year.”
- Personal development
 - Make-up and beauty.
 - Style and fashion. Specifically, shopping for clothes.
 - Self-image improvement. Specifically, by improving one’s hairstyle (“Braids, twists, and buns, OH MY!”), make-up, and fashion sense. “From color choices to what fashion style best suits them, it can get very confussing.”
 - Information. A combination of writing and public speaking. The student’s recommendations for presentations? The second slide should contain ten bullet points. “The third slide would be a five paragraph essay about the topic.”
- Languages and cultures
 - Foreign travel. “The students might have to take quizzes.” The class concludes with trips to seven countries, each lasting one week. “It would be worth it to say, ‘I have been to all seven countries just in Middle school.’” The student acknowledged that this class would be expensive. “It will cost you 1000 dollars to get your seven tickets to fly to all those countries.”
 - Foreign language (unspecified). (Most schools in the United States do not introduce foreign languages until high school, typically age 14.)
 - Mandarin Chinese (2×).
- Life skills
 - Introduction to automobile driving and safety. Students are too young to drive cars, so they will train on go-karts. “Go-karting would allow you to practice those basics so much that driving a car would be a walk in the park.”
 - Wilderness survival. The final exam is a practical.

- Careers
 - How to get a job. Focusing on the mechanics, like filling out an application.
 - Choosing a career. Students research various careers to learn more about them.
 - Veterinarian. “This elective would teach students all that they need to know to become a vet such as the basics of being a veterinarian and how to treat animals.” The basics are all you need to know!
 - Doctor. Students will attend class in surgical scrubs and perform dissections and autopsies. Field trips include going to a local hospital and assisting an actual doctor. (You are responsible for your own malpractice insurance.) “In conclusion, having a class about what a doctor does is what we should have at our school because it is informative yet amusing.”
- Wildcard
 - *”I suggest reshersh and repor class.”
 - *Adobe Photoshop. This essay was a one-page advertisement for Photoshop, going into the product’s features in fantastic detail.
 - Fire.
 - Inventing. Students will create an invention over the course of the term.
 - Television appreciation. “Our current electives require thought and work. ... This class is a much needed easy A+. ... This class will prepare our students for the real world. You can learn more life lessons in an episode of Spong Bob than the average person can learn in his life. ... Watching mindless television for a whole period for credit will be a great elective.”
 - *Being lazy. This student cut to the chase. Not like that “television appreciation” student who tried to disguise it as something remotely educational.
 - “Social hall.” This class is limited to fifteen students and consists only of students you choose to take it with. One of the school buildings will be converted to “social hall,” with one classroom for doing homework, another classroom converted to a movie theater, and others available just for hanging out with your friends. Food and beverages will be provided, of course. There is no examination. “I think Social hall would be an excellent elective. Students will inhance social skills, physical skills and eating ideas.”
 - “Anything you want.” Students are free to roam the campus for this double-length period. “It would be the greatest elective yet to be invented. There will be no teachers, no rules, no fighting.”

Other sentences, taken completely out of context for maximum amusement.

- *”Sure fit people are in good shape but they nee exersise too.”
- “Students would prefer it for its ingenuous content.”
- “There is only so long a 7th grader can sit in a cluttered room and write.” (A comment on the assignment, perhaps?)
- *”In this class, students will learn how to vacation.”

- *”We would be able to go to the lake three times a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays.”
- *”It would most likely shock the students that when you have a job you have to do just about everything by yourself.”
- *”Art is hard and easy but not both.”

Spelling corner: See if you can guess the word before reading the answer.

soddering	hazardist	conclonstion
gragwwhts	Joner of Achievement	
tords	enchurens	

Best new word: “confussing”

Note: Hover over dotted words for explanations/answers.

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