meanings, some working together and others openly contradicting one another to complicate and enrich the interpretive process. “The One-Liner” raises questions, performs meaning, and multiplies our perspectives on the text. To this extent at least, style is indeed the “vital thing.”
board for all to see. For example, if you are teaching Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, students might suggest “Liars! Liars! Liars!” appropriating Mrs. Turner’s quote from the end of Part I, or such thematic titles as “The Library.” If you are teaching John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” students might suggest titles based on quotations, such as “Cold Pastoral,” or formal or thematic titles, such as “Questions and Answers” or “Ars Poetica.” If you’ve asked students to use quotations as titles, it is easy to segue into a close reading of the passage that includes the quotations they have chosen. If you have asked students to choose titles that are not quotations, this can lead to a broader discussion about the text’s themes and images.

**REFLECTIONS**

The first goal of this exercise is to teach students that texts are not natural objects but rather are deliberately made artifacts. Students often forget or ignore that literary texts are the results of purposeful decisions. While I do not encourage students to interpret the author’s intention as the meaning of the text, I find that reminding them that the text was intentionally created improves their ability to interpret it. Asking students to choose a new title for a text reminds them that a title was carefully chosen in the first place. Students are fascinated to learn whether a text had an earlier or provisional title—such as *Mrs. Dalloway*’s initial title, “The Hours,” or *A Raisin in the Sun*’s working title, “The Crystal Stair,” or *The Waste Land*’s pre–Ezra Pound title, “He Do the Police in Different Voices”—and to think about how Virginia Woolf’s novel or Lorraine Hansberry’s play or T. S. Eliot’s poem would have been different with a different title. The first benefit of this exercise, then, is that it shows students how every piece of a text, even a supposedly straightforward title, is open to interpretation because it is the result of deliberation.

The second goal of “The New Title” is to teach students that identifying the themes and images they consider important in the text can be the starting point for their own independent literary analysis. By choosing a quotation or a word they think could be titular, students are making a judgment about what is significant in that text and, as a result, how to understand it. One of my students who thought he had nothing to say about *Much Ado About Nothing* contributed the title “Beatrice and Benedick.” Even that fairly uncreative title led to a discussion about why *Much Ado* is not named after its lovers the way that *Romeo and Juliet* is and why, more generally, the comedies are not named for characters the way the tragedies are. This student eventually came to the conclusion that *Much Ado* is a transitional play, a comedy that veers toward tragedy because of the lovers’ excessive self-satisfaction.

This exercise works with nearly any text, although I would not try it with poems shorter than sonnets. I also would not use it with texts that students
find very difficult: it does not make a frustrating text easier but rather shows how apparently easy aspects of stories, poems, or plays are actually rich with significance.

I have used “The New Title” with great success teaching everything from Renaissance plays to postmodern novels. Every time I do it, I find that students talk and listen and learn from one another. They are surprised that the titles chosen by their classmates differ so much from their own. They laugh at the funny titles and compliment the insightful ones. And they learn that they each approach the text with their own invisible subtitles.

The Descriptive Word

Erwin Rosinberg

An exercise that both solicits and questions students’ preexisting ideas about a literary genre or period.

Genre: any
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: easy or moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: any
Semester Time: first day and last day
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: none
Estimated Time: 10 to 20 minutes

EXERCISE

Disrupt some of the usual opening-day classroom protocols by instead engaging directly with what students may already know about the course’s topic. Choose a key term that the course will revisit and refine throughout the semester, and ask students to share any descriptive words that immediately come to mind. In a period-based course, you might ask students what adjectives they would associate with the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Victorian era, and so forth; in a genre course or a topic-based course, you could ask them to think about how they would describe the ideas and images suggested by, for example, “Gothic” or “Romance.”