

# Rockets in English Class? Of Course!

by Dr. Donna M. McDougall,  
2002 Cannon Award winner.

A visitor to the high school campus was watching my students launch their rockets. "Wow!" he said enviously, "I wish my science teacher had done this." My students laughed and told him, "This is English class!"

Building and launching rockets has been part of the Senior English curriculum for several years. It is part of the science fiction unit. The students read several science fiction short stories and one novel, usually Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*.

This novel leads to several class discussions on such issues as the ethics of genocide, the problem of communicating with a completely alien race, and the right of humanity to ask individuals to sacrifice their lives for the benefit of the whole.

They do two essays. One is rewriting the short story "The Father Thing" from the aliens' point of view. The other is a formal letter to NASA either accepting or declining an invitation to go on the next shuttle launch. (The class is usually evenly divided between those who would love to go and those who want no part of it.)

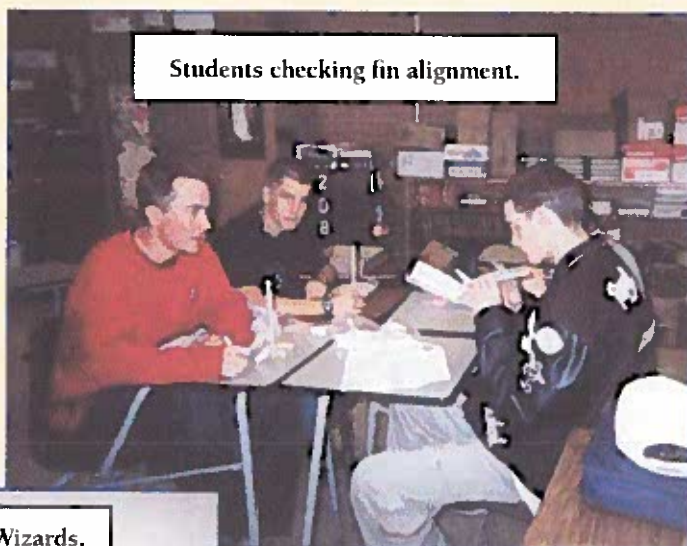
Then they build rockets. I use either Viking or Wizard kits from Estes. A kind hobby shop owner in Flagstaff supplies them at his cost.

From an English point of view, the rocket building provides training in reading and following directions. Most of my students have never before built anything with their own hands.

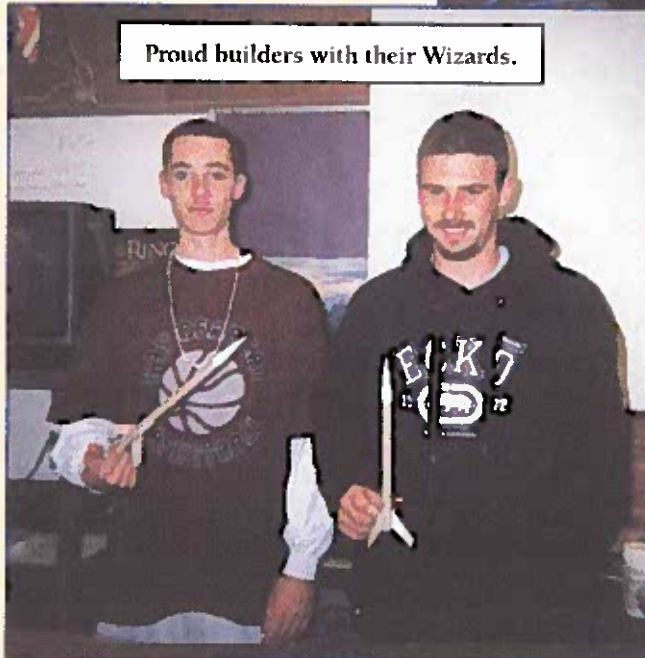
Since most of them do not really believe that their rocket will fly, the first launch is usually accompanied by shrieks.

The launch takes place on the football

Students checking fin alignment.



Proud builders with their Wizards.



field, strictly following NAR safety rules. I have never had a breach of safety and have never had any kind of accident. It usually takes two days to launch, allowing time each day to police the field for spent engines and bits of wadding.

While the application of rocket building is carefully documented in my lesson plans, the main reason for using rockets in English is simply that it is a lot of fun.

Ray High School senior English students watch the launch.

