To enhance class discussion, small groups could initially be asked to spend ten to fifteen minutes brainstorming stereotypes about a particular gendered parent-child relationship: one group working with fathers and sons. 

Questions on Meaning

1. Manning's father communicates through gestures rather than words.
2. They have learned primarily that they don't have to compete to express affection and that there are many different kinds of communication.
3. Clearly Manning has always felt loved, but he recognizes that these challenges show that his father loves him.
4. His purpose is definitely to express love for his father. In a larger context he also wants to suggest the strength of a nonverbal relationship between fathers and sons.

Questions on Writing Strategy

1. Manning begins with his bitterness to set up for the emotional progress of the essay, which moves from frustration and anger to acceptance.
2. These options suggest that he believes they have both learned something about new avenues of communication. We aren't supposed to predict anything; just knowing options exist shows progress is being made.
3. Manning compares the thrill of hooking his first big fish with his father. Although going to win his first arm-wrestling match with his father, he still has a debt to his father. Manning is a little sorry in both cases to know that he can defeat him. He has a duty to his father.
4. The narrative progresses through events that demonstrate Manning's winning, his whole upper body pushing down in hope of boyish powerlessness: his "whole upper body pushing down in hope of boyish powerlessness," his "arms and hands out in a cruciform," his "weakness and helplessness." The author's words reflect the writer's conflict.

Questions on Language

1. Competition suggests sportsmanship, organized rivalry with a goal, rather than the discordant clash of wills that conflict suggests.

2. This reduces the father to just the arm, giving the reader a greater sense of how large a role the father's arms play in characterizing the man as a whole. The image of him as "the arm" suggests both his competitiveness and his protectiveness.
3. Manning still feels competitive with his father but is able to sacrifice his sense of being protected by a father who is stronger than he is.
4. Mononucleosis is a disease involving a high white-blood-cell count, causing fever, weakness, swollen lymph nodes, and a sore throat.

Brad Manning on Writing

Manning has some good advice for college writers, especially about taking the time to plan and revise and working for one's own voice. Students who struggle to write may dispute Manning's implication that writing can be a better means of self-expression than speaking. You might reinforce Manning's message that writing, unlike speaking, provides a chance to build and shape thought.

Sarah Vowell

Shooting Dad

To begin discussion of this essay, consider the particular cleverness of Vowell's title: Her father is literally a "shooting dad" (a dad whose pastime is shooting firearms) and, in her conclusion, Vowell says that after his death the family will fulfill his request to bag his ashes and shoot them from his cannon (thus, the family will be literally "shooting Dad").

If you pair this with the previous essay, Brad Manning's "Arm Wrestling With My Father," consider asking students to compare and contrast the father-child relationships these two writers present. One interesting difference is that Manning focuses much more overtly on the love he feels for his father and his father's love for him than Vowell does in describing her relationship with her father. Why might this be less of an issue for Vowell? How would students characterize Vowell's feelings for her father and his feelings for her? Her portrait is for the most part quite affectionate, but she also treats her father with considerable humor, poking fun at his various foibles. Despite their differences, as Vowell has grown older, she and her father seem to have developed an easygoing relationship, with little if any of the unspoken baggage Manning describes between himself and his father. Do students think this a reflection more of gender, age, or basic family dynamics? (Note that Vowell's family seems far less "sly" than the family Manning describes.)

Another focus of discussion might be Vowell's highly polished comic tone, her delightful way of casually tossing in a verbal joke—having "to move revolvers out of my way to make room for a bowl of Rice Krispies" (par. 3), for example, or referring to the floor of her father's shop as "a tetanus shot waiting to happen" (7). You could divide students into groups, have each group analyze Vowell's essay for further examples, and then report on their