

Time to Write

The Newsletter of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum

Vol. 5, No. 1 November 2000



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Time to Write is the newsletter of the College of Letters & Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Correspondence should be addressed to *Time to Write*, L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum, Dept. of English, UW-Madison, Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53706. We can also be reached via phone at 608-263-2732 or via email:

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Encouraging Smart Conversations in Blue Books

Some Advice for Instructors

Gregory S. Galica, Department of English

Those of us who are committed to using essay exams in our classes, despite the difficulties we encounter in grading them, must already be convinced of their value in testing our students' ability to articulate their understanding of course material. Although there's plenty of evidence that well-constructed objective exams can be used to test student learning beyond the level of simple memorization, many of us who use essay exams believe that they are indispensable in measuring higher-order thinking—that essay exams are, as Norman Gronlund suggests in his book *Constructing Achievement Tests*, valuable for “measuring such complex learning outcomes as the ability to create, organize and evaluate ideas” (73).

More recently, Writing-Across-the-Curriculum proponents have claimed that, if used effectively, essay exams can also play a role in developing thinking skills necessary for success in various classes disciplines.

Whether we think of essay exams in terms of their value in testing student achievement or in fostering student learning, we're going to be more successful as teachers if we can make our exams an organic part of our courses and if we design pre-test activities



and construct our exams to match the skills we're trying to develop and to test.

Integrating Essay *Exams into the Class*

Our tests can be thought of as a process that begins the first day of class and goes on throughout the semester—a process that influences the way we teach our classes and the way our students study and write about course material.

In my literature classes, for example, I've tried over the years to prepare my students for exams by using short, informal and ungraded writing and revision assignments prior to exams. And I try to sequence those assignments so that students move gradually from simpler to more complex thinking and writing. (See the “Cognitive Skills and Key Words” table on page 3 for insights into assignment design, wording, and sequencing.)

For example, if I want my students to see that there are significant differences in the

attitudes toward “work” or “labor” in Dickens' *Hard Times* and in *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, and I know that I'm going to ask them on the exam to write about those differences, then some time prior to the exam, I'll ask my class to write a one-paragraph micro-theme (just a few sentences) on each of those books, stating in their own words the view of labor presented in each text.

After commenting on their responses and perhaps sharing some of the successful ones with the class, I can ask them to write a micro-theme stating the similarities or differences they see in these two writers. The idea is to prepare my students to construct a three- or four-sentence thesis about the differences that they find in these writers and then to follow that up with a statement about each of the writers (from those initial micro-themes), which can serve as a basis for developing that thesis.

I believe that activities like these prepare my students for writing an exam essay. But, more importantly, they also become part of the total learning experience in my class. I could (and often do) provide study questions in advance of an exam to give my students a chance to prepare an answer (again, I mean a brief thesis statement) to some possible questions,

and then, at least, an outline of the material they would use to develop that thesis. But that approach tends to isolate "test time" from the whole learning experience, and I think that our goal should be to integrate testing into learning.

To reach this goal, we need to think about what we want our tests to accomplish with regard to our students' studying and learning, and then we need to develop some activities that will facilitate that learning. For example, if we want students in a psychology class to see a complex web of influences among a number of individuals who have done research and writing on the development of personality, then it can be useful to have them write informally about those influences from time to time during the semester. Perhaps students can write micro-themes to focus on individuals as they are covered in the course, and then later, they can write on the relationships among them. And I think I'd want to sequence activities like these to move along a logical continuum from simpler tasks, like summarizing basic information about individuals, to more complex tasks that involve comparing their views, applying them to a particular situation, or perhaps evaluating them.

If used effectively, our essay exams can be a more valuable part of the whole learning experience in our courses. But this will happen only if we (1) know what we want our students to learn—in terms of both knowledge and skills; (2) direct their learning through activities designed to improve their knowledge and skills, as they also develop the crucial ability to articulate their knowledge; and (3) construct assignments and exam questions that will serve our purposes.

I've been aided in my thinking about how I can design better assignments and better exams by using a chart that I adapted some years ago from B. S. Bloom's work on the levels and stages of cognitive development (see page 3). I also use that chart in my Writing Center workshops when I talk with students about strategies for taking essay exams. I use it there in two ways: (1) I use it to remind students that professors are testing their skills—not just their knowledge—and that means they have to think about the kinds of questions that are likely to appear on the exams. I want to encourage students to do more than merely memorize information about individual topics they have covered, and to suggest that

they think about what they might be asked to do with their knowledge, beyond merely summarizing what they know. (2) I also use the table to sensitize students to the kinds of prompts that might be used in essay questions. I advise them to circle key words or phrases in the questions as they are reading them and to be sure to identify both the tasks and the topics of exam questions.

"...we're going to be more successful as teachers if we can make our exams a more organic part of our courses..."

Designing Exam Questions...

I'm aware that our goals in our classes differ, as do our purposes in using essay exams, so there's no advice about writing exam questions that fits all situations. But from my experience working with thousands of students over the years, and especially trying to help them interpret confusing questions, I think I can offer some advice that can be generally useful.

(1) Match pre-test assignments and test questions to both the material and the skills you want students to learn, and use prompts that clearly direct their activity. Multiple-task questions will be easier for students to handle if they are written to move logically from simpler to more complex tasks. (For example: What is x's view? How does that view compare to y's view? How would each view hold up when applied to explain situation z?)

(2) Make questions clear and uncluttered, written with only absolutely necessary background information. And use only those sub-prompts or suggestions for responding to questions that you really want students to follow. If you do include a lot of background information to set up a question, be sure to figure an appropriate amount of reading time into any time limits you set on responding to that question.

(3) Make clear the difference between any open-ended questions you ask (that is, those with more leeway for answers) and those questions that are more clearly directed toward an expected response. And convey to your students some sense of the range of answers that will be accepted for more open-ended questions.

(4) Write those questions that have an expected response as questions, rather than as directions. This will help to focus

the scope of the question, and it will allow students to think of their answer to your question as a thesis for their essay. You're also more likely to get the kind of answers you're looking for when you use the question form. For example, using directions like "Discuss the influence of x on y" is likely to generate a wider range of responses than asking a more focused question like "In what ways has x influenced y's views of issue z?" Of course, if your purpose is to allow for a wider range of responses from your students, then using directions instead of a question would be more appropriate. The point is, as the saying goes, "Be careful! You might get what you asked for."

And Evaluating Them.

Evaluating essay exams is never going to be easy, and we've all struggled trying to be fair in our grading. As is the case with constructing tests, no advice will fit all situations, but here are some thoughts about adjusting our grading to the constraints of in-class writing.

(1) For in-class essays, provide time and length guidelines that are realistic. Remember that the amount of time you give your students to write an essay should not be thought of as time they are given to *answer* the question (that's something they should strive to do in the first few sentences); rather it should be thought of as time given to *develop* the answer. It's a good idea to prompt students first to tell you the answer to the question in a few sentences, and then to show you some specific details to develop that answer. Those pre-test micro-themes I suggested earlier can be very valuable in preparing students to articulate an answer to a question in just a few sentences.

(2) Be sensitive to the possibility that even the best students may misinterpret your intentions, especially when answering more open-ended questions. So, when grading, allow some leeway for legitimate, though unexpected, approaches by some students.

(3) Finally, be sure to adjust to genre constraints for writing due in class. Be realistic about the amount of development you can expect, and be more flexible about the formal characteristics of essays than you would be in grading out-of-class essays. I think an in-class essay has more in common with "conversation" than it does with formal "essay writing." For that reason, it's a good idea to encourage intelligent informality.

As I revised this article for publication in *Time to Write*, I thought about how

some advice that might be useful to one person might not apply to another. What I wanted to accomplish here is to offer some thoughts about how we might construct and use essay exams to make them more useful in our classes. For those who are interested in looking more into constructing and using essay exams, I'd recommend the following texts: Norman Gronlund's *Constructing Achievement Tests*; John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*; and *The Bedford Guide to Teaching Writing in the Disciplines*.

Greg Galica (gsgalica@facstaff.wisc.edu), a member of the academic staff in the Writing Center and an instructor in the English Department, is an expert on essay exams. In addition to offering his know-how to faculty in this article, he wrote to a student audience in his text *The Blue Book: A Student's Guide to Essay Exams*, published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1991. He has offered advice about essay exams to over 10,000 students in this 18 years of teaching a popular Writing Center class on essay exams.

The "Cognitive Skills and Key Words" table below is designed to give you an overview of five types of thinking that can be tested on essay exams, and it lists some of the key words or phrases that can be used in directing activity toward a particular kind of thinking. Adapted from B.S. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of higher-order thinking, the table can be used to match task-prompts to the kind(s) of thinking we're trying to foster or to test. Note that higher-order tasks rely on the kind of thinking necessary for tasks placed lower on the table. Thus, I can't form an opinion (task #5) about the merits of a position or viewpoint if I can't see positions in relation to one another (task #3) and also how they might apply in particular situations (task #4). And, of course, I wouldn't be able to develop my viewpoint without being able to summarize (task #1) or explain (task #2) each position. This continuum is the key to sequencing assignments and essay questions.

Cognitive Skills and Key Words

What the Question Tests	Key Words or Phrases in the Question
Memory: surface knowledge of basic facts and information (ability to summarize)	list and discuss, enumerate, define, review, trace, outline, summarize, classify, give the characteristics, tell or say "what" something is
Comprehension or Understanding: in-depth knowledge (ability to analyze or explain)	analyze, review, illustrate, explain, prove, define, diagram, discuss, demonstrate, show "how"..., show "why"..., show significance
Relational Thinking: broad comprehensive understanding of how individual things are related to one another and to the course as a whole	compare, contrast, relate, show history of..., show causes of..., show what the effects are or what they would be, show the influence of..., show how these are related, trace development of..
Applied Knowledge: problem solving (ability to apply knowledge in a particular situation)	apply, use, interpret, solve, do, show how this applies, 'read...' and discuss or explain, 'look at...' and discuss or explain, show how to do...
Judgment: decision making (ability to form, explain, and support an opinion)	evaluate, judge, justify, criticize, interpret, support, argue for or against, show what you think about..., and explain why you think that, compare and choose

Talking *about* the Intangible While Talking *to* the Individual Toward Fruitful Student-Teacher Conferences

Bonnie Smith

Assistant Director, Writing-Across-the-Curriculum

How do you explain to a student exactly why you got totally lost somewhere on page two of her essay on the Kantian sublime? When that freshman sits beside you in your office, nervously waiting for you to hand down your verdict on his argument against lifting the Cuban embargo, how do you constructively let him know that his ideas aren't as reflective as you'd hoped they'd be?

Though they take up a good deal of time, student-instructor conferences often prove to be some of the most productive energy you can spend as a teacher. In no other instance do you get to concentrate solely on one student's writing—and in no other instance does your student get concentrated individual attention from you; when you write end comments and marginalia on a student's draft, you cannot gauge his reaction or hear his response to your suggestions. One-on-one conferences offer potential for dialogue—between student and teacher, and between writer and reader—unique to giving written feedback.

According to a recent study conducted by the Verbal Assessment Committee that examined students' perceptions of writing education and feedback, UW students regarded conferencing as the most valuable form of feedback they receive from teachers. In the study, which examined UW students' satisfaction with various components of the Comm-B course, the statement "individual conferences with the instructor about writing were very helpful to me" earned a 4.16 rating (1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree). This rating was an average of 369 self-reports on a web-based survey.

But *conducting* the writing conference, a setting that requires two individuals to engage in dialogue about the vague issues of the writing process, can prove to be a formidable task for even the most experienced teacher. Here are some tried-and-true strategies for facilitating a writing conference that will leave you with a repertoire of conferencing strategies and your student with a focused plan for revising her paper.

At the beginning of the conference

- Expose your own humanity by engaging in a bit of small talk to set the student-writer at ease!
- Briefly discuss a plan for the time you have together. You might even have the student fill out an agenda form (see Mary Lou Odom's sample on page 5) or email you an agenda the night before.
- Concentrate on discussing higher-order concerns such as the purpose of the paper and its organization. If the paper's thesis-driven, talk about developing arguments and clarifying counter-arguments.
- Make sure the student has a clear concept of the assignment at hand. You might even turn over the assignment sheet, and have the student explain it to you.

During the conference

- Take notes, or have your student take notes. It's important that students leave a conference with something tangible, because we all know that memories of that discussion in a professor's office can become awfully hazy to a student who's sitting in front of the blank screen at 3 AM.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Use gentle imperatives such as "Tell me a little bit more about that" to encourage reflection.

If you get lost in your student's paper

- Have her talk through her ideas, and record exactly what she says to provide a tangible record of her thoughts to guide her when she goes home to revise.
- With a thesis-driven paper, encourage the student to articulate the question the thesis "answers." You then have something tangible and specific to say about what's missing from the draft.
- Read aloud an example of a confusing sentence, and tack the word "because" on the end. Have

the student fill in the blank. This heuristic can drive a student to come up with reasons for unexplained assertions or ideas.

If your student's ideas are thin

- Go get a cup of coffee while your student freewrites on the topic at hand. Return to talk about ways to organize ideas.
- Play devil's advocate with your student to deepen and complicate ideas. (Or, for even more rigorous intellectual gymnastics, have your student play devil's advocate with his *own* ideas.)
- Brainstorm along with your student by doing a "brain dump"—that is, list all the possible revised thesis statements or counter-arguments you can. Help the student map out new ideas to aid in planning the revision.

Conceptualizing (and re-conceptualizing) your role in a conference may be something you'll do on an ad hoc basis. Some students and their work may necessitate a more directive approach in which you lay out potential strategies for revision.

But, because I find potentials for genuine dialogue between student-writers and teacher-writers enthralling, I suggest conceptualizing conferences as exchanges between *writers* and *readers*. So throughout the conference (and throughout your reading of the student's writing), think of yourself as a reader who's striving to describe the mental experience of reading the writer's draft. During conferences in which engaged, two-party dialogue is a goal, you have great opportunities to motivate students to work harder on their writing, coach students to be more precise in representing their ideas, and model ways in which they can develop and organize their thoughts.

Some specific strategies adapted with thanks from John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1996), 44-48.

**Sample Form for Students in a Writing Course to Complete & Bring to Conferences:
Mary Lou Odom, Director, English 100 Tutorial Program**

(Instructors should distribute this form to students prior to passing out a conference time signup sheet.)

•* Failure to participate fully in your conference counts as TWO absences. •*

Writing Conference Form

Your conference is at _____ on _____ in 7174 Helen C. White.

You need to bring the following to your conference:

- 1) drafts 1 and 2 of Paper 1
- 2) revisions you've been working diligently on since draft 2
- 3) the thoughtful answers and issues that you developed in completing the remainder of this handout

Please answer the following questions prior to your appointment so that our conference can be as efficient and productive as possible.

1. List specific questions you have about comments your peers or I have made on your work.
2. Are there areas of this assignment on which you are unclear? Are there areas where you feel my expectations about your writing are unclear?
3. Evaluate your progress on this assignment thus far. Describe progress you have made.
4. What are your primary concerns about this assignment? What areas do you feel are strongest? Weakest?
5. What strategies for improving your writing have you found useful thus far? What other strategies would you like to develop?
6. Are there other areas regarding your writing or your performance in the class in which I could be of help?

**LOOK OUT...
The Writing-Across-the-Curriculum
website will debut soon!**

Our website will feature:

- hundreds of pages of advice from UW-Madison instructors on planning & designing your course
- back issues of *Time to Write*
- information about proposing a new Comm-B or Writing-Intensive course
- online registration for Writing-Across-the-Curriculum workshops
- access to a network of teachers across campus who can confer with you about teaching writing

*Comm-B faculty & TAs,
mark your calendars . . .*

spring Comm-B training
will be held on
Tuesday, 16 January &
Wednesday, 17 January 2001 from
9 AM - 12:15 PM!

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