

Time to Write

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

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Looking for an Argument?

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African Languages and Literature

There's an old Monty Python routine that sums up what happens at a certain point every time I teach writing to a new group of students. It goes something like this.

"Are you looking for an argument?"

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are!"

"No I'm NOT!"

"Yes you ARE!"

"But I don't like Spam!"

"Spam spam spam spam...."

Argument as a Discipline

Sometimes it seems that convincing students that they are looking for an argument is itself a difficult argument to win. Here, I will attempt to convince you that teaching argument depends upon asking students to read, analyze, and talk about arguments on a regular basis in order to help them learn to make better arguments in their writing.

I think that argument has always been more important than meets the eye. In fact, values have always been constructed by a process of ongoing argument. In terms of today's academic disciplines, when we teach our students to write within a discipline, we are teaching them how to present arguments that fit the conventions of that discipline.

When a student develops an argument for my class, it doesn't matter so much

whether she succeeds in convincing me that she's right. What matters is that she convinces me that her argument is well formulated according to disciplinary conventions. A crucial and often overlooked first step toward helping students write successfully for a discipline is helping them understand that academic writing involves arguing something.

Argument Within the Discipline

Before students can formulate their own arguments, they need to examine good models of argument, preferably from the discipline in which we ask them to write. So I turn to the reading assignments and lectures from the course. With this material, I urge my students to:

- **Be argumentative readers!** Scribble responses and objections in the margins of all books. Remember that authoritative books are the ones that most need to be defaced. Textbooks and works by prestigious authors are ideal targets.
- **Ask questions!** When you finish reading and scribbling and doodling, write down answers to questions you think you might be asked on an exam. For example: What is this author trying to persuade you to do or think? Did she succeed? Why or why not? What was most convincing about the author's argument? What's the best counter-argument you can offer?
- **Know that if it's worth reading, it's worth debating in writing.** An electronic discussion list allows students to post their argumentative responses publicly, testing them out on the rest of

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Stimulus & Response: Electronic Journal Writing

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Spanish & Portuguese

In the fall of 2000, I began teaching a new Comm-B course, "Introduction to Luso-Afro-Brazilian Literature." Structured around the analysis of texts that were originally written in Portuguese, the class had two purposes: to teach students basic skills of literary analysis and to introduce the cultures of seven countries on three continents, including Brazil, Portugal, Cape Verde, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and São Tomé and Príncipe. Students write three formal papers, each six-to-eight pages in length.

I was aware, however, that many of my students had not studied literature at the university level and that the subject matter would also be quite foreign to the average UW student. For these reasons, I decided to incorporate more informal writing exercises that would allow students to address questions arising from the cultural contexts of the readings and give them a place to begin practicing textual analysis.

Journal Concerns

My experience teaching foreign language composition had already convinced me of the many benefits of having students maintain journals. Journal writing opens up a different level of communication between student and instructor and often relieves the anxiety that many students feel when speaking in class. In the case of my Literature in Translation class, however, I quickly came upon several unanticipated problems with the journals.

During the first year I taught the class, I carried large stacks of notebooks to my office or home only to confront pages of barely

legible, scrawled prose. When I was able to decipher the entries, they were often disappointing, because they did not meet my expectations.

Though I wanted students to try out new approaches to analyzing a literary text, many confused the role of the course journal with that of a personal diary. Instead of using the pages of their notebooks to record their initial reactions to a text and to generate ideas that might be expanded in formal papers, students tended to enter subjective and impressionistic responses that would be of little use to them further down the line.

Electronic Methods

Many of these drawbacks can easily be overcome by having students submit electronic versions of their journals, using the email function of WebCT. Each week, students log on to the course's WebCT page. The first assignment asks them to describe their interest in the course; after that, each week they submit one-to-two typed pages in response to class discussion and readings.

Assignments change weekly: sometimes I ask students to choose and explain a passage from a novel that illustrates the narrator's perspective; other times I ask that they analyze a poem or comment on an image that relates to places, works of art and other objects alluded to in the readings. In this latter case, I post scanned images in the image database of WebCT.

When answering students' email messages, I refrain from just hitting the reply button. Instead, I use WebCT's "Quote" function, which allows me to copy the student message and return it with my comments embedded in the text of the original, which in

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Example of an Electronic Response to a Student's Journal Entry from Professor Sapega's "Introduction to Luso-Afro-Brazilian Literature" Course

Note: The student's writing is in italics; Professor Sapega's comments are in capital letters.

HI ALAN, THIS IS A GOOD, DETAILED ENTRY. SEE MY SPECIFIC COMMENTS BELOW.

>First the basic similarities: Rosa and Amado both write with spiritual themes. Amado obviously integrates condomble into 'The Two Deaths.' On a micro level, characters like Bangs and Quiteria are described practicing condomble. On a macro level, the resurrection of Quincas Wateryell and his earlier class transformation in the novella suggest spiritual undertones. BE CAREFUL HERE WITH THE SPELLING OF CANDOMBLE...ARE THE UNDERTONES VERY STRONG? I THINK HUMAN VIRTUE AND VICE HAVE A BIT MORE TO DO WITH IT.

>Rosa and Amado also focus their writings on the working and lower classes, as opposed to the upper, cosmopolitan class seen in Assis' novel. Amado depicts Wateryell as a hard working civil servant for most of his life until he succumbs to the 'other' world, or the life of the underclass. Rosa's characters live out in the middle of nowhere and are depicted as simple, quiet people, such as farmers. There is almost no mention of the upperclasses in either of Amado and Rosa's texts. WHY DO YOU THINK THIS IS SO?

The Science of Peer Review

Thomas Broman
History of Science

Most of us, I suspect, would agree that the peer review process represents one of the weaker links in the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum-Program. Students are often unpracticed in reading critically, and that fact, coupled with their understandable desire not to give offense to their classmates, leads them to be too easygoing and superficial in their criticisms of each other. As a result, when students in my History of Science 212 class were asked to comment on peer reviewing, they usually called it a waste of time at worst, or marginally useful at best.

HOS 212, "The Physician in History," is a Comm-B course which offers a broad survey of the intellectual and social history of medicine from antiquity through the most recent developments in health care. Its basic format calls for students to receive three five-to-six page essay assign-

ments, one after each of the three units of the course. The first two of those essays require students to write and revise a complete draft of the essay and participate in peer review. It is in the context of those drafts that peer reviewing—and complaints about it—have entered into the picture.

Over the years, I have gradually introduced a number of changes to improve the effectiveness of peer reviewing. If responses solicited from students immediately afterward have been any indication, these changes have helped make the reviews more forceful and focused.

This impression has been supported too by my TA colleagues who report a high level of engagement by students in the process. Of course, the new attitude may stem from the fact that many UW students today take more than one Comm-B or writing-intensive

course during their studies, and hence get repeated practice in peer reviewing. Therefore mere practice, not pedagogical innovation, may be responsible here.

This objection notwithstanding, let me describe how I have tried to help students become better peer reviewers.

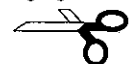
"...students are specifically directed to attend to where and how authors signal their arguments..."

1. Integration of critical perspectives into readings. Of course, nearly everyone at this place claims to be teaching "critical thinking" in one form or another (who indeed would want to claim otherwise?), but science students, who form the bulk of clientele for 212, are often unpracticed in the rhetorically complex form of argumentation deployed in history and other humanities disciplines. Therefore, in the reading guides I distribute during the first several weeks of the course, students are specifically

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Mark your calendars...
Spring training for new Comm-B TAs
will be held on
Monday & Tuesday, January 13th & 14th, 2003
from 9 AM to 12:15 PM!
Registration is required.
You may register at <http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC> (click on "Events & News").
For more information, contact
Brad Hughes, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum,
at bthughes@facstaff.wisc.edu, 3-3823.



Looking for an Argument?

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the class. This often works best when the material is stimulating or controversial. The best set of posts I ever got consisted of responses to folklorist Alan Dundes's "Into the Endzone for a Touchdown: A Psychoanalytic Consideration of American Football." Faced with Dundes's interpretation of "tight end" and "wide receiver," every student had an opinion.

- **Make it personal.** When it's time to study for exams, *memorize* authors' names, along with the authors' core persuasive points. Remembering that "so-and-so was trying to convince me of such-and-such" makes it personal, and personal encounters tend to be more memorable than impersonal ones. Students will perform well on exams if they can remember three things: the names of the authors they've read, the authors' argumentative points, and how to win an argument with each author.
- **Argue with lectures, too.** On the bus or the bike ride home after lecture, think about what the instructor was trying to get you to do or think. Take a few minutes to scribble an argumentative response to lecture or discussion before rushing home to crawl back in bed.

Obviously not all students are going to follow such counsel assiduously. I've noticed that even after I make these suggestions, most of the students immediately file out of the room when the bell rings, rather than remaining seated and arguing in writing with their instructors. I guess I can't win 'em all. But nudging students toward a more argumentative relationship with their course material is at least a partial solution to some of the most widespread problems we encounter when trying to teach them to make arguments of their own.

Thesis Over Theme

However, it isn't just students' attitudes that sometimes need adjustment, but also their critical skills. One point I always hammer away at in class is "thesis over theme." By the time students get to UW they can usually recognize a theme, but many of them wouldn't recognize a thesis if it ran up and bit them on the butt. For instance, if I asked my Folklore students something like, "So what did you get out of that article by Schmoo?"

they might reply, "Well, it was about Norwegian reindeer yodelers from the Pine Barrens of Central Wisconsin." I explain that yes, that was the *topic* or *theme*. But what was the *point*? What was the *thesis*? Most students find it much harder to recognize just what that thesis was, much less state it with any precision. I think it's important to offer them a solid example of what I'm looking for. In this case: "Schmoo argues that Norwegian immigrants continue to imitate the mating call of the rutting reindeer bull, despite no longer having reindeer that need to be called in for milking, as a ritual enactment of virility and a statement of ethnic identity."

Every field has its own rhetorical rules that govern what makes an argument or hypothesis or interpretation, and

the data it purports to explain, sufficiently valuable to be worth the attention of those in the field. When we teach writing within a discipline, we're basically trying to get students to internalize these rules, or as many of them as possible.

To sum up, then, teaching students to look for and write argumentatively doesn't involve only teaching students to write

thesis statements. It involves helping them look for and recognize and debate arguments they're already reading and witnessing daily. And, if we can teach them to look to arguments in the disciplines they're studying, they will quickly realize that the models of what we're asking them to write are right in front of them. They can then start to work through the process of critical thinking and argumentative response, resulting in more than just "Spam spam spam spam spam." ♦

"I believe that nudging students toward a more argumentative relationship with their course material is at least a partial solution to some of the most widespread writing concerns that we encounter."

WAC on the WEB

- *Sample assignments*
- *Evaluation criteria*
- *Course design ideas*
- *Discipline-specific advice*

<http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC>

The Science of Peer Review

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directed to attend to where and how authors signal their arguments, how various sections of a reading are knitted together, and whether the conclusions drawn from the evidence are justified. Teaching assistants in the course support this activity by assigning to the students reading responses aimed toward the same end.

2. Greater focus of the review. For years, I have distributed a form to students, offering guidance about what to look for in papers they are reviewing. In the past, I routinely asked too much of them: identify thesis and topic sentences in the introduction, assess the introduction's adequacy in providing a "road map" for what follows, evaluate the author's linkage of one paragraph to another, critique the content and suggest alternatives, note excessive use of passive voice and non-descriptive verbs, and so on. In effect, I was asking them for the kind of critique I would provide myself.

More recently, the guidance to reviewers has become much simpler, focusing on those things in the essay that the reviewer can most easily identify. Our guidelines direct reviewers to a) identify the author's topic and thesis statement; b) construct a "reverse outline" of the paper, in which the reviewer writes a single sentence stating the main idea of each paragraph; and c) assess how well the paragraph statements in the reverse outline appear to hang together. The reverse outline exercise is especially useful for pointing out to writers where paragraphs are overly long or incoherent.

3. Modeling the process. During the week after the first essay assignment has been handed out, I ask TAs to enlist three or four volunteers from their discussion sections to submit an electronic draft directly to me one day earlier than the due date. The lure is that students get to have the instructor as one of their "peer reviewers." The cost is that one of them will watch me do the review in front of the entire class—*anonymously*, of course. I then go through the chosen paper paragraph-by-paragraph in lecture, taking care not to do more (well, not much more!) than the students will be doing for each other. This exercise seems to have been successful in showing students what to look for and not to shrink back from offering honest, engaged criticism.

Those are the basic elements of what I have done to produce more effective peer reviewing. I would not unconditionally guarantee that the essays produced by students are the better for it, but at the very least students' willingness to enlist in the process has been greatly increased. ♦

Stimulus & Response: Electronic Journal Writing

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turn obliges students to go back into their text and to reread what they wrote. In order to distinguish between the original entry and my comments, I respond in capital letters, also taking care to insert line breaks between my thoughts and the student's (see example on page 2). At the end of the semester, I use the "Manage Students" function to determine how many emails each student wrote, verifying that each weekly assignment was turned in for credit.

Written Results

I have found that my students' writing has benefited greatly from this process. For the most part, problems related to overly impressionistic responses have been quickly eliminated, perhaps because typing into the computer strikes the students as more "formal" than just scribbling in a notebook, perhaps because in my

responses I have come to point out more clearly what I expect from them.

Indeed, my comments on students' writing have become much more detailed. Rather than relying on just a check mark (or some other similar annotation or generic comment in the margin), I find that I must engage more actively with the ideas expressed in each entry. In many cases, what started out as a simple response to a student's initial entry winds up consisting of an exchange of ideas between professor and student that develops throughout the course of semester.

Now, in the second year of using WebCT journals, I have come to see that they have significantly altered my approach to teaching writing. By requiring these electronic journals, I find that I expect much more of both my students and of myself. ♦

For more on WebCT, visit wiscinfo.doit.wisc.edu/webct/.



Teaching Tips

The Biocore program recently surveyed its students, asking them to cite an element of the course that they felt contributed to their improvement as writers. Many students cited peer review, which is perhaps not surprising considering that Biocore students participate in three peer-review sessions during the semester.

To help them become good reviewers, instructors ask students to brainstorm types of feedback they feel are most helpful to them as writers. This step helps students understand their roles as reviewers rather than editors, preparing them to generate constructive critiques. As they review and talk about each other's writing, students continue to reflect on their own writing.

Science writing lends itself well to peer review because the genre elements of writing up research are consistent from assignment to assignment. This consistency gives students an opportunity to practice solutions to writing problems even if the subject matter has changed.

—*Janet Batzli, Biology Core Curriculum*

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Writing Across the Curriculum

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