

Composition Chronicle

USA English Department

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Write and Write Often By Frank Ard

A common piece of advice is frequently passed on in creative writing workshops: to become a better writer, you must write, and write often. It is true that reading and analysis helps greatly toward becoming a skillful writer, but firstly, I believe, we must get the would-be writer spurred into the act of writing. From there, writing teachers ought to guide the writer at work. Reading and analysis helps the most is when the writer is using reading and analysis to think more rhetorically about their work. However, we are left with the fundamental question: how do we get the would-be writer to writing? The answer, I believe, is simple: writing prompts. I have found prompts to be well worth the time and effort, a reliable means of forcing students to write often that leads incrementally to stronger writing.

At the beginning of each class, I have my students write for five minutes, working from a very specific prompt. I ask for a minimum of three sentences, and I count this writing time daily for participation credit. I have found each semester that, at first, students write with some measure of annoyance. However, I have also noticed that most students seem to move from minor annoyance to begrudging acceptance of the ritual, and then on to at least some enjoyment in the process. My goal here, though, is not to teach students to enjoy writing (that, I feel, is an impossible task), but instead to simply *do it*. Students tend to write poorly on the prompts at first, trying to get it over with as quickly as possible. However, something dramatic happens within a few weeks: students, more often than



not, start to take more time to think through their approach, even writing more than necessary.

It may not seem like much time, but five minutes of dedicated, undisturbed writing time is all it takes for students to think seriously and logically about a topic and execute a piece of writing with a definite aim. Is this not what we are ultimately asking them to do, albeit in longer form, in their essays? Those five minutes they spend writing toward a prompt at the beginning of class, then, is warming up for what they will later do with more time and in more detail. In order for students to learn to write with a definite aim (to learn to

write rhetorically), I always present them with a specific prompt, and the prompts that I use are always tailored toward the unit the class is working through. For example, a prompt for the rhetorical analysis paper may ask students to describe a place or thing using only one sense, which teaches the use of sensory description, or I may write a short passage from a story on the board and ask students to write about the rhetorical techniques being used. For the evaluation paper, I might ask students to write criteria for how they would review the last movie they watched.

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For the classical argument paper, I might ask students to think about someone who argues using only emotion and ideological belief and to tell me the kind of (flawed) evidence that person might try to use to back up their claim, which teaches students to think about what's wrong in such a scenario so that they may avoid making the same mistakes.

An important point here is that I do not allow my students to simply free-write; my definition of free-writing here is writing about any topic, writing with no definite aim and no inherent direction. However, I am not arguing against free-writing. I am arguing against free-writing for English composition. Free-writing can be incredibly useful for more experienced writers, but composition students simply are not skilled writers yet. Free-writing does not give the learning writer enough direction to help them improve. Additionally, the inherent lack of direction in free-writing does not allow the student to think rhetorically about their work, which is one of the key goals of writing prompts in the composition classroom. I have found that in order for writing prompts to be effective and produce results, the prompt must be carefully and creatively tailored to the specific demands of the current essay assignment. Used in this way, the would-be writer is working on a skill-set that will come in handy on their upcoming paper.

I would like to note that one likely problem teachers may encounter is that

students may not take the prompt as seriously as the teacher would like. In order to combat this problem, I make it quite clear that students will only get participation credit if they write the requisite number of sentences. Also, I use the prompts to take roll. That is, I take up the papers after the five minutes are up, and I process the roll after class is over. This way, four things are accomplished: 1) The process gains a sense of importance when the prompts are taken up; 2) I do not disturb students by calling roll during their writing time, allowing for a quiet and dedicated five minute work window; 3) While it may seem like a loss of a precious five minutes of class time, the five minutes that would have been spent calling names is spent productively with students engaged in their writing; 4) the ritual provides a hard-and-fast method for dealing with tardiness: after the five minutes are up, the prompt is erased, and anyone who comes to class after that point are counted absent. Thus, the writing prompt becomes essential to the composition student when they might otherwise not take the exercise seriously.



Winners of the 2011 Composition Contest and their teachers at the spring Composition Contest Banquet. From left to right are Deborah Ferguson, Samantha Arbutina (EH 101 Runner-Up), Rachael Safley (EH 101 Runner-Up), Bianca Jester (EH 101 Winner), Andi Sowers (EH 102 Winner), Melissa Smith, and Bill Jordan.

Using the writing prompt method described above, students are forced to write each class, and, when used effectively, students may improve substantially from just five minutes per class. I have seen firsthand the effectiveness of this method, and, therefore, writing prompts have become a ritual in my classes, a singular constant even as I have tinkered with virtually every other aspect of my approach. I firmly believe that to become a better writer, you must first write, and writing prompts are an excellent way to achieve this in the composition classroom.

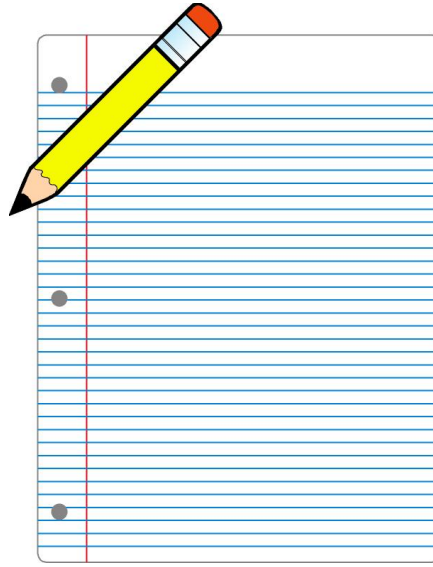
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Please consider contributing to the *Chronicle*! Contact Dr. Larry Beason (lbeason@usouthal.edu) for more information.

So This is What it's Come To? By Michael A. Mason

When I told my family that I had been hired as a teaching assistant for the English department, they asked me what exactly I would be covering in my coursework. When I answered with “argumentation,” they were befuddled by the department’s apparent rejection of formal grammar instruction. No diagramming sentences, no memorizing different kinds of subordinate clauses. These are all requisite for success in freshman writing. “How does *that* prepare students for writing in literature classes?” My answer proved equally disappointing: in literature classes your writing is usually a response to what you’ve read—you make your own argument about the work, culture, or history and use the text as evidence.

What I gather from the reports of my parents and their siblings is that their experience with college English in the 1960s and 70s was much more formal (or perhaps a different kind of formal). You were expected to have an answer to questions such as “Why is Percy Shelley a poetic genius?” And apparently the acceptable answers involved Shelley’s adherence to and success



within formal literary structures. This seems terribly archaic to me because (1) I don’t see literary genius as a tangible thing (and not one that can be tremblingly spoken over the heads of dozing classmates), and (2) a writer’s “genius” does not seem like something that precedes the work. Instead, my education has led me to believe that “genius” is discovered within the dialogue surrounding the work.

But I think my opinion has been shaped by the academic relationship that I have had with argument-writing. Where I see a complex network of social and historical discourse being exchanged between students and instructors, my family sees a cacophony of apologetic relativists who don’t believe in *true* knowledge.

So why does academia appear to be steeped in relativistic rhetoric to the average outside onlooker? For academics, *everything* needs to be proven: a claim needs evidence and explanation. The mechanics of “common sense” are not taken as self-evident and, therefore, are not trusted as foundational. In fact, the deeper into academia you get—especially into the sciences and language studies—the more you realize about “common sense” that (1) it is not so common and (2) the true nature of things resides outside the conceptual realm of common sense. When you break down the barriers that common sense builds, everything indeed appears relative. Common sense tells us that rocks and walls are solid. Chemistry tells us that rocks and walls are not solid at the molecular level because atoms are mostly empty space. More material travels through a solid than is guarded by the “solid” surface.

My question is this: is there a relationship between the argumentative style of truth-seeking that we teach in today’s composition classes and the apparent relativism that has been attributed to contemporary academic thinking?

I set up a small uncontrolled anecdotal experiment (duly unscientific because of a lack of time, breadth, and resources) last semester using my two EH 101 classes as participants. During the research project where I assigned the classical argument, I set up the same criteria in both classes: a 1000-word paper that argues a point dealing with the arts, entertainment, or sports. I

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Rachael Safley and parents at the Composition Contest Banquet.

So This continued:

required three sources, MLA formatting, and a thesis that clearly states a position in a controversy. For my 10:10 AM class, I taught the thesis as a more limited kind of argumentative statement, framing it as “a statement that either takes a side in a controversial debate or proposes an alternative to a controversial debate.” For my 12:20 AM class, I taught the thesis as a more versatile statement “that can take a side in a controversial debate, propose an alternative to a controversial debate, refute or uphold a source that argues a point in the debate, or clarifies a lesser-known aspect about the debate.”

Here are a rundown of the statistics. My 10:10 class (more limited thesis) had a mean grade of 81 (out of the papers that were turned in). Without delving deeply into the specifics, over 70% of the papers turned in scored above a 73. My 12:20 class (broader thesis) received a mean grade of 76, only 63% of the papers turned in scored above a 73. These are both good scores, and I’m certain they were mostly made possible by the fact that I made sure this section was longer, spending more time doing peer review and discussing whether their theses fell within the confines of the prompt. Two weeks before papers were due, I had each student present his/her topic to the class without arguing a point by writing on the board their subject and the supposed causes and effects of that subject. As a class we discussed the validity and logic of each. And finally I had students present their arguments to the class and asked the class to pick out logical fallacies within each argument. This was less successful at inspiring participation than the cause/effect presentations; however, it did help the students who were having trouble with thesis-creation.

But what accounts for the difference in mean grades between the two classes? My first answer is chance. I think I had a more motivated bunch in the morning than in the afternoon. However, there are interesting differences within the

sets of papers handed in. The 10:10 class had more arguments that overlapped with others in the class, their points were less versatile, and their involvement in the controversies felt much more clichéd. However, their performance in argumentation was stronger than the 12:20 class.

The 12:20 class had more original positions, more alternative points of view, more creative involvement in the controversies; however, their argumentative performance was not as strong.

So now I’ve reached a pedagogical dilemma. Which lesson is more valuable: do we encourage more creative thinking about topics in exchange for structural integrity? Or do we encourage more practiced prose and logical sequencing in exchange for nuanced positions? I’m sure I’m committing the “false dichotomy” fallacy that I told my students to avoid in their arguing. In fact, I’m sure these two are more mutual than exclusive. Stronger logical thinkers at the EH 101 level are typically the more nuanced thinkers and vice versa. But in my small sample, I did see a bit of a difference.

On the one hand, the type of skills that I taught in the 12:20 class appeared more relativistic—a good argument does not even have to deal with the controversy itself, it can be a meta-argument, an argument about an argument, so long as it is well-articulated with evidence to back it up. In the 10:10 class, a more formal discourse emerged—a good argument must explicitly enter into the confines of the controversy and must have an unambi-



Deborah Ferguson, Samantha Arbutina (EH 101 Runner-Up), and her mother at the Composition Contest Banquet.

guous position.

So this is what it’s come to? A choice between promoting what I believe are two necessary skills for academic success. I find myself preferring the more liberal, relativistic arrangement. I feel inclined to give a mediocrely-wrought creative position more points than one that is well-articulated but hackneyed, and I know that my advisors and colleagues would sympathize but with a reminder that it is a *writing* class, first

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Composition Committee:

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Edited by
Bill Jordan