

Teaching Writing to Learn

A workshop in Scaffolding and Effective Commenting strategies to maximize teaching writing outputs

Writing assignments are not intended to make a student's life difficult, but to improve skills sets for dealing with the professional world adequately.

Teaching Closed-Form Academic Prose

1. Helps students conduct academic inquiry, make academic arguments and enter discourse communities of their majors.
2. Helps develop professional skills.
3. Teaches organization and clarity.
4. Teaches students how to think within a discipline.

Problem—Thesis

A true problem is at the heart of academic writing, driving critical thinking and requiring multiple drafts for conceptual clarity.

- Identify a problem, question or issue.
- What is its significance?
- Why has it not been resolved yet? What does existing literature say?
- What is your thesis or resolution for the problem?
- How does it argue against, or aid, other perspectives?
- What is new or distinctive about your thesis?

The thesis statement that the writer places confidently in the introduction of a finished product may have been discovered late at night in the conclusion of an earlier draft.

The effect of closed-form writing is to stress meanings up front. By summarizing the whole before presenting the parts, closed-form writing produces a cognitive framework that helps readers process information.

Alternative Genres

- The 'expressivist' movement was popularized by James Britton's influential study of children's writing development in British schools (Britton and others, 1975).
- Expressivist writing is 'close to the self.'
- It helps assimilate new ideas by linking new material to what one knows or has experienced.
- Journal keeping, in-class free writing, informal letters, blogs, etc. are examples of expressivist writing.
- Expressivist writing leads to more 'reflective writing' by allowing students to 'think on paper' and connect learning to their own experiences.

Prepared for the Hostos Writing Center by Preeti Sampat, Writing Fellow 2013-14

--It also facilitates complex multi-dimensional writing that does not necessarily rely only on one thesis or methodological rigidity and allows the integration of the writer's voice into the text.

Task 1: Design one closed-form and one expressivist assignment for students enrolled in 2 different courses.

Genre-awareness

--A student who produces strong papers in a first-year composition course may struggle with a political science or art history paper.

--Criteria for good writing are contextualized within genres.

--Writing for a Sociology or Anthropology course may rely on evidence from direct observation as opposed to quotes from an economic survey, or use both. Whereas writing in economics may not use any 'qualitative data' but derive graphs or tables from quantitative or statistical data. Experimental reports from psychology may refer to the observation in an experimental setting, whereas sociological observation may just mean 'hanging out' with those being observed.

--A literature professor may want students to write an argumentative thesis; whereas a history professor may want students to rely on a thesis emerging from research in primary sources, to see where the evidence leads the student. The former emphasizes an interpretive or reflexive stance, the latter an evidentiary stance.

--Student preferences and learning beyond preferences: thinking/ feeling; sensing/ intuitive; judging/ perceiving; extrovert/ introvert

Scaffolding for long assignments

When is the assignment due?

How long is it?

Can it be broken into a few sessions? If not, can it be broken into different parts?

Effective commenting on drafts

Positives

Selectivity—Global comments; specific instances

Concrete tasks—strategize and plan; revision strategy

Encouraging tone

References:

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Bean, John. 2011. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Elbow, P. 1997. 'High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing.' *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* No. 69.