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ABSTRACT

After an introduction by James L. Marra explaining the Intellectual Heritage Program at the College of Art and Sciences at Temple University (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), this paper presents four brief faculty essays describing various techniques that the writers use in their classes in the program. The techniques discussed in the paper are tailored to the text-heavy and writing-intensive nature of the courses, and tend to abbreviate the writing process in many ways, while at the same time paying close attention to the need for students to write often and under the specific guidance of faculty. Essays in the paper are: "Impromptus, Journals, and Essays" (Neil Big); "Assuming Standpoints" (Tania M. Calvimontes); "Using Summary/Paraphrase Exercises To Improve Reading/Writing Skills" (Paul Marasa); and "The One-Page Paper" (Dianne Perkins). (RS)

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Techniques for Improving Student Writing and Thinking Skills in Text-Heavy Courses

"Introduction," James L. Marra

The Intellectual Heritage Program of the College of Arts and Sciences at Temple University faces challenging pedagogical problems. As a core-curriculum requirement for all Temple undergraduate students, the two Intellectual Heritage (IH) courses represent 40% of the writing-intensive requirements for those undergraduates. At the same time, the nature of the courses is such that the reading matter spans centuries, dogmas and disciplines, ranging from the Greek Age to the twentieth-century and from the theological concerns of *The Bible* to the scientific advancements of *The Origin of Species*. Beyond this, the raw volume of reading matter is large in its own right. Taken individually, these characteristics of the program may not seem too daunting. However, taken collectively, they pose a serious challenge, if in fact the writing-intensive nature of the courses is to be given serious consideration on the part of faculty and students.

What follows are four faculty essays describing various techniques that the respective faculty use in their Intellectual Heritage classes. These techniques are tailored to the text-heavy and writing-intensive nature of the courses. You may notice how the techniques tend to abbreviate the writing process in many ways, while at the same time paying close and careful attention to the need for students to write often and under the specific quidance of faculty to help student writing meet the various demands of form and function.

"Impromptus, Journals and Essays," Neil Big

Impromptus, journals and essays can form part of any qualitative or quantitative course. All use paragraphs to improve students' critical thinking and ability to write, skills essential to any career.

Impromptus are one or two paragraphs about a subject, problem, quote, comparison, idea, or principle. With open-ended, text-based questions, I use impromptus as 5 - 8 minute pop quizzes to test students' preparation and improve their ability to think and write under pressure. Collecting the papers, I ask students

for responses, using their answers to begin the lesson. Magically, the quiz focuses attention, engaging the students in the outcome. Sometimes in the last 5 - 8 minutes of class time, I use impromptus to test retention. I also use them as open book quizzes and overnight assignments, adjusting topics to stimulate thinking and close reading, and to avoid the "writer's block" of take-home projects. And I use them as uncollected exercises to report on small group work or clarify individual thoughts before discussing them. One can use impromptus to describe quantitative principles, problems, events, or processes. Impromptus develop students' ability to think and write quickly about a subject, as in professional life.

Journals use paragraphs and a short time frame to habituate students even more to quick, thoughtful writing. I ask students to choose three quotes per text, and write two pages, a paragraph or two per quote or several about the ensemble from a text. If they refer to the quotes, they can use their imagination to analyze texts, discuss concepts, emotions, memories, values, and assumptions, or compare quotes. As 15 - 20% of the grade, journals are surprisingly painless motivational tools; many students find their writing becomes more fluent and gratifying. Allowing freedom about content, I grade journals on sincerity of thought and commitment to quality. Adapted to courses based on critical thinking, scientific concepts, textual quotes, or problem solving, journals can inspire student enthusiasm for the subject and train students to express specialized insights in everyday language.

Essays fashion paragraphs into arguments oriented by a thesis statement and paragraph topic sentences. For humanities classes, I require students to use quotes to compare texts or explain themes, patterns, characterizations, or concepts. To help students, I give them a guide about the writing process. The essay length varies with the course level: 1, 2 - 3 or more pages. Requiring students to write coherently, I mitigate anxiety by accepting rewrites and by working with students in individual conferences.

Through questions to be answered in paragraphs, exams can reinforce the reading, interpretive, writing skills developed through the integrated use of impromptus, journals and essays.

"Assuming Standpoints," Tania M. Calvimontes

I have found that the development of critical and analytical thinking skills in a text-heavy, writing-intensive course is best served when students present in their papers well supported opinions agreeing and disagreeing with some aspects of the theory, concepts or specific consequences articulated in the texts.

I assign papers 2 - 3 pages long, that follow the basic format presented below:

First part, summary in a paragraph or two of the main argument, or the content of a central concept. Quotes are required to reinforce their paraphrasing.

Second part, presentation of their own opinion, providing reasons that will support their position, both agreeing and disagreeing with the author.

Assuming standpoints agreeing with the more "convincing" content of the argument on one hand, and a critique of the weak aspects of the theory on the other is only possible once the student has engaged actively in reading the texts. Taking a stand implies thorough analysis of the ideas proposed in the text, and a careful consideration of their scientific, philosophic or political consequences. Why are these arguments irrelevant or valid? The provision of relevant examples is highly encouraged as an aid to well-constructed arguments.

Students at this point have involved themselves with the text and are in the process of interacting with its theories or concepts. This leads the students to construct well-founded opinions, and consequently paves the way for clear and sound writing.

Once the logic of this basic format is presented to the class, other options can be introduced to offer students some freedom of choice. I ask my students to:

Option 1 -- Work on a selected paragraph in the text. Students are to analyze the paragraph and establish its implications to other concepts, again expressing their opinions while identifying the strong and weak aspects of the model.

Option 2 -- Relate a central argument of the text or theory with events that are part of today's life in general or particularly relevant to their career interest.

"Using Summary/Paraphrase Exercises to Improve Reading/Writing Skills," Paul Marasa

In a text-heavy and writing-intensive course like Intellectual Heritage, the challenges are acute. Students are expected to understand difficult texts -- and quite a number of them -- and to talk and write about them with some sophistication. The obvious problem lies in finding time to instruct students on writing, since so much time can be taken up with the texts themselves. The common-sense solution is to use writing exercises in order to achieve an understanding of content, and to incorporate the results of that writing in later assignments (at-home essays, in-class examinations), where the students' own analytical/argumentative skills can be displayed in a structured manner.

The use of summary and paraphrase exercises has been particularly helpful in approaching these problems. If students can restate a complex idea in their own words, if they can reduce a difficult idea to its essential meaning, the distance between the students and the texts, as well as that between reading and writing about the texts, is narrowed.

Three techniques have borne fruit in recent classes. The most basic is what I term "transliteration," which is particularly helpful in approaching poetry. Students are asked to restate in conversational prose the "artificial" language of the poet. In this move from one "alphabet" to the next, I warn students not to discuss symbolism or "themes," but merely to express in their own words those of the poem. I find that students become less intimidated by poetry if they can "claim" a stanza via their own means of expression.

Once such a basic understanding of a text is achieved, we move on to a more analytical approach, one that involves writing paragraph definitions of key terms from the reading. In this way, the text can be divided into its essential components. The benefit is often that students find themselves using one term to assist the definition of the other, and begin to see the relationships between the parts and the whole.

As we approach these key terms, we try to keep in mind the practical nature of the exercises. Since their in-class examinations involve writing paragraph definitions of key terms, I sometimes ask students to reduce their definitions to as few words as possible, to a single phrase that will help them remember, not just what the term means, but how that term fits into the text as a whole. These "catch phrases" are shared with the class, and form the basis primarily for content-oriented writing; however, they are also helpful as students plan their position papers on the ideas generated by the texts.

Although there are limits to summary/paraphrase -- it can sometimes be a jump between content knowledge and assessment of that content's significance beyond the text -- these exercises are an important first step in the challenging process of understanding a difficult text.

"The One-Page Paper," Dianne Perkins

In college courses freighted by long and demanding texts, one-page papers are a versatile vehicle for improving students' writing. The brevity of the one-page paper encourages students to isolate and master particular intellectual tasks -- as well as to achieve, through enforced focus, the necessary density of a good body paragraph.

Even seasoned instructors of College Composition -- despite initial reservations -- will discover at least ten pedagogical assets of the one-page paper in text-heavy courses:

1) By excising the need for an introduction or conclusion, it forces students to master the nexus of analytic thought purveyed by the traditional essay: the body paragraph;

2) By demanding achieved content within a single page, it forces students to tighten their prose -- to renounce padding, redundance, and deadwood;

3) By narrowing the parameters of traditional essay topics, it forces students to read a text closely -- to pay scrupulous attention to the nuance and implications of the author's language;

4) By restricting the parameters of traditional essay topics, it also enables instructors to isolate the cognitive tasks demanded by good writing -- helping students to distinguish among endeavors they often confuse: summary versus analysis, analysis verus evaluation;

5) By circumscribing their arena of expression, it allows students to practice -- many, for the first time -- documentation within a manageable, unintimidating forum;

6) By increasing the number of papers that they can assign in a semester, it affords instructors maximum flexibility in structuring the writing component of their syllabi;

7) By requiring an average of only five minutes each to grade, it allows instructors to return papers quickly -- offering quick and frequent feedback on student writing;

8) By evoking so many easily generated topics, it affords our students maximum flexibility in pacing themselves to meet the writing requirement of a text-heavy course;

9) By reducing the amount of time required for grading, it encourages instructors to recommend revisions -- crucial to the improvement of students' writing;

10) By permitting an increased number of paper-writing assignments, it offers students the most universally hailed variable in improving their writing -- frequent practice.