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**FIVE HUNDRED PAGES AND A TOPIC OF HER OWN:
SUCCESSFULLY DESIGNING AN ADVANCED WRITING COURSE
ON 19TH CENTURY BRITISH WOMEN NOVELISTS**

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During the fourth year of my teaching assistantship in the spring semester of 2008, I was asked to teach a 300-level advanced writing course in which I was given the creative freedom to design the syllabus, choose the textbooks, craft all assignments, and organize the course content. However, there was one stipulation: the course, which was cross-listed with the Women and Gender Studies program, had to focus on the general topic of women and gender. From the outset, I anticipated two specific challenges with respect to designing this course. Firstly, while our English department offered some sort of advanced composition class every spring semester, this specific course—with a concentration in gender—had never been offered before. To my benefit, then, the possibilities with respect to course design were limitless: I had full creative control over the course. To my detriment, however, I was given very few directives or resources to inform my design process, excepting the requirement that the course must heavily emphasize *both* advanced composition *and* specific content. Secondly, as a graduate student who was accustomed to teaching 100-level composition courses and 200-level content courses that had more strictly defined learning objectives, I had not yet taught a 300-level course, especially one that equally emphasized advanced writing and content. Relying on my previous teaching experience, I had to determine how to craft a course that reinforced the fundamental skills of composition—like developing a strong thesis statement—in a manner that was neither rudimentary nor esoteric. In addition, I had to establish course content that was not only much more specific than the survey courses I had taught but also interesting, appropriate to the course, and accessible to a wide range of upper-level students from various disciplines.

In order to begin this task of designing my first 300-level writing course, within the requirements provided, I used several of the strategies for course design offered by Linda B. Nilson in her book, *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*. Firstly, I adopted a “course design by objectives” approach, which advocates “starting the course design process with what you want your students to be able to do by the end of the course” (Nilson 17). According to Nilson, this method of course design “guarantees a high level of student engagement because the process steers you towards student-active teaching strategies” (17), which was my aim for this course. Following Nilson’s advice, I first established my “ultimate or end-of-the-course learning objectives” (23). With respect to content, the general direction of the course was already pre-determined—it had to focus, in some fashion, on the topic of women and gender studies. With respect to composition, I wanted the culminating assignment in the class, or ultimate learning objective, to be a literary research paper (approximately 15-17 pages in length) that allowed each student to engage with a topic of his or her choice and design. Having established the larger goals of the course, I considered the following questions: How can I design an advanced writing course that enables students to achieve both community goals—in which all students learn and use the same writing skills—and individual goals—in which each student can apply those writing skills to a project that allows him or her to explore personal interests? How can I best use class time to create a foundation of writing skills and gender-based content while allowing students to develop independent critical thinking and writing skills? How can I successfully devote equal time to developing the topic of gender while focusing on the necessary advanced skills of composition, research, argument, and organization? In this essay I will outline the manner in which I designed a course with such a specific focus on both content and rhetoric; discuss the structure of the course itself; and address the necessary emendations I would make if given the opportunity to teach this course again.

My first challenge with respect to course design was to determine how to effectively incorporate the topic of women and gender studies. With my ultimate learning objective of building toward a 15-17-page literary research paper in mind, I had to focus the course on a topic that would both unify the class and allow for each student to freely explore an independent research topic. After much thought, I decided to focus the course on 19th century British women for several reasons. Firstly, 19th century Britain represents an era of both female subjugation and proto-feminist efforts to enact change and promote gender equality; the cultural, historical, and literary conditions facing British women in the 19th century encapsulate not only the explicit oppression of women but also the various ways in which women reacted to such oppression, from acceptance to subversive critique to overt rebellion. Ultimately, the 19th century represents a time of crucial change with respect to women’s rights, providing the foundation of organized feminism in Britain (Steinbach 246): the first petitions for women’s suffrage were drafted; political advocacy groups were formed in order to increase female freedom with respect to education, employment, marriage, and sexuality; laws on marriage, divorce, custody, and property were passed in order to provide women with greater freedom and control; and the first women’s college was established. [1] Despite these strides toward gender equality, a great deal of resistance to feminism from

both men and women also dominated 19th century British culture, creating a complex nexus of issues with respect to gender—the perfect climate for a gender-specific advanced writing course. Secondly, I felt that the countless restrictions facing 19th century British women as well as the wide range of contemporary responses to these oppressive conditions would shock, fascinate, and even repulse a group of 21st century undergraduates. In other words, the cultural and historical world inhabited by British women more than two hundred years ago differs so significantly from 21st century America that students would be forced to immerse themselves in the circumstances of a past culture that challenged their present convictions about gender, culture, and history. Lastly, women novelists began to emerge more prominently as professional authors in the 19th century, especially in Britain, virtually “dominat[ing] the novel market” in the Victorian era and producing a substantial number of multi-volume novels (Steinbach 49). However, as Susie Steinbach notes in *Women in England, 1760-1914: A Social History*, “Female authors fell into two distinct groups—eminently respectable women who circulated private copies of their writings for the amusement of their family and friends, and distinctly less respectable ones who published their work for profit” (50). Several female writers even “wrote secretly” or disguised themselves under the veil of androgynous pseudonyms (50), adding another provocative layer to the issue of gender and writing in 19th century Britain. Thus, with respect to achieving my ultimate learning objective of having students compose an extensive literary research paper, the female-authored novel provided the ideal focus for students’ individual research projects. While these novels varied in length, topic, style, and genre, they all engaged with the complex issues of gender in the 19th century.

With respect to course content, I chose a textbook edited by Alison Twells entitled *British Women’s History: A Documentary History from the Enlightenment to World War I*, which is an anthology of excerpts from primary texts in the 19th century, such as pamphlets, newspapers, journals, literature, political reports, conduct books, and autobiographies. Ultimately, I felt that such a text would not only inform students on the various cultural and historical conditions facing women in the 19th century—including class, sex and marriage, politics, work, religion, and education—but also effectively immerse students in the actual circumstances of the 19th century. By studying primary texts of the time, as opposed to secondary texts *about* those original documents, students would become more familiar with the actual ideas, vocabulary, and various approaches to women’s issues that existed in the era. All students would read this text, which would provide them with a common scholarly understanding of 19th century British women. In order to also achieve my learning objective of allowing each student to pursue an individual project, I selected nine novels; each student would be required to choose one of those nine texts, which he or she would spend the semester independently reading and critically analyzing, culminating in a final research paper. Asking each student to read a novel independently and craft a research topic (based on the common historical foundation that we had established) would not only promote responsibility and creativity with respect to the development of an individual project, but would also enable each student to use the course content to explore the specific manner in which his or her chosen novel addressed the social and cultural gender norms that dominated the era.

After I determined the content of the course, I established my student learning objectives with respect to composition and advanced writing, which “describ[e] what students must be able to *do* if we are to meet our own general objectives” (Nilson 18). Ultimately, I wanted students to write with a focus on *process* rather than product; to engage in the practice of revision in order to constantly improve both writing and critical thinking skills; to hone their abilities to effectively—and ethically—gather, read, and evaluate literary research; to sharpen advanced academic writing skills that would prepare them for future courses at the undergraduate level and beyond; and to produce a substantial literary research paper that was thesis-driven, coherently organized, evidence-based, and critically sophisticated. Thus, in addition to the textbook I had chosen on 19th century British women (*British Women’s History*), I chose a textbook that focused on composition: *The Craft of Research*, co-written by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams, which is an advanced writing handbook that guides students through the process of completing a research project. *The Craft of Research* is accessible and interesting, breaking down the writing process into necessary steps—from forming a topic, to making a claim and supporting it, to drafting and revising—and guiding students toward the ultimate goal of *my* particular course, crafting a longer research paper.

My next task was to concretely establish the three necessary parts of my student learning objectives: “a statement of a measurable performance,” “a statement of conditions for the performance,” and “criteria and standards for assessing the performance” (Nilson 19). With my general learning goals in mind of reinforcing “writing as a process” and instructing students on how to ethically and effectively craft a literary research paper, I designed the major and minor writing assignments that students would complete throughout the semester as well as specific standards of assessment. I first decided to hold students responsible for smaller weekly writing assignments (approximately 1-2 pages in length), which would serve as “building blocks” toward the final paper. With respect to larger assignments, I assigned an annotated bibliography, which would focus on the 19th century novel they had chosen and their individual research topic. The aims of the annotated bibliography were to sharpen students’ skills of effectively and ethically acquiring, reading, and assessing literary research, to expand their knowledge on the critical conversations surrounding their 19th century novel, and to encourage their critical participation in these conversations. I also assigned a final paper proposal, in which students would formally organize and present their critical ideas about the final research paper. The aims of the final paper proposal were to prepare students for the challenges of the final paper by asking them to compose a working thesis, to consider the importance of their audience, to evaluate their progress with respect to research, and to anticipate possible problems with their projects. Lastly, I assigned an individual presentation, which required each student to explain to the class both his or her project and his or her individual process of conducting research and writing the final paper. The aims of the presentation were to build a research community within the class, in which students shared their individual projects with an informed audience, and to emphasize the importance of writing as a process.

Having established the course content, my specific student learning objectives, and specific assignments with respect to composition, I now faced the challenge of how to structure the course. My class met three days a week for fifty minutes (Monday, Wednesday, Friday), so every Monday, students would read a chapter from *The Craft of Research*, which enabled us to focus on the process of writing and the particular steps they needed to take with respect to their research projects. Every Wednesday, students would read a chapter from *British Women’s History*, allowing us to explore background information on the 19th century, which would inform their research projects. Every Friday, students would engage in a writing workshop, thus joining the process of writing with the exploration of content. In each workshop, I asked students to apply the writing practices we read about in *The Craft of Research* to their individual writing projects. They completed workshops both on general topics—such as properly citing literary sources, writing for a particular audience, and ethically taking notes on literary sources—and specific topics—such as describing their individual research topics (using particular steps/guidelines from *The Craft of Research*), submitting some of their individual annotations for the annotated bibliography, outlining their final papers, and drafting and revising each major assignment they completed. On Fridays, then, students would either break into small groups or work as a class, receiving in-class feedback, and then submit their work to me for written commentary and a grade. In addition, our class spent a few Fridays in the library, where students actively researched their paper topics, enabling me provide

them with any assistance they needed with respect to searching for—or even literally locating—sources.

Due to the students' common writing goals and uniform understanding of 19th century cultural contexts, the members of the class consistently benefited from the unique and informed feedback of their peers. While a maximum of two students were working on the same novel for their final projects, during writing workshops I almost always paired students with someone working on a different novel. This way, each student could use his or her individualized knowledge to assess the work of his or her peer and provide objective—but informed—critical feedback. In other words, when consistently asked to assess a different peer's work on an unfamiliar novel, each student was encouraged to integrate, internalize, and increasingly rely on his or her own knowledge of the general subject matter in order to complete the workshop. This reinforcement of each student's general knowledge of the course content built his or her confidence as a researcher, scholar, and "expert" on the subject matter, which, in turn, enabled the student to approach the writing process with a greater sense of purpose and self-assurance. With each peer review, students provided more content-specific *and* composition-specific feedback—a direct reflection of their ability to instill confidence in themselves and in one another through the workshop process. Ultimately, the students *became* the very audience that they were addressing in their final papers—an academic research community interested in 19th century fiction and gender issues: they formed their own "expert" and ideal community that shared common research goals and interests while each contributing a unique perspective on 19th century British women and on the individual process of advanced composition.

Overall, this course was quite successful, and I achieved most of my goals with respect to both content and advanced composition: students enthusiastically participated in class discussions about the novels and their context; they crafted very unique and creative paper topics that applied elements of 19th century British women's history to their specific novels; they actively engaged in the *process* of writing through drafting, revision, and editing; they ethically (and pretty effectively!) gathered, read, and evaluated literary research; and they eventually produced thesis-driven literary research papers. However, if I were to teach this course again, I would implement some crucial changes. With respect to content, I would attempt to cover less material from the *British Women's History* text. I only had fifty minutes each week to provide necessary background information on that week's topic; to discuss an entire chapter of excerpts from primary texts, which the students had read for that day; and to allow students to engage with the topic through class discussion. Ultimately, I spent many Wednesdays "rushing" through the material, thus almost always needing about 15 minutes of class-time on Friday to finish our discussion. In addition, I often felt like I did not provide students with enough class time to communicate their ideas on some of the reading assignments, to fully engage with the material, and to apply that material to their own research projects.

With respect to composition, I would re-structure the deadline for the final essay, requiring students to submit a completed first draft of the final paper (perhaps one month before the official deadline), which they would then revise completely and resubmit at the end of the course. While I devoted the last two weeks of the course solely to writing workshops that centered on the final paper as well as collected—and provided written feedback—on *parts* of their final papers, I never asked students to submit a full draft to me before the official deadline. To be honest, I had wrongly assumed that—by the end of the semester—students would have received enough personal feedback from me (in addition to the general guidelines presented in *The Craft of Research*) to guide them through the composition of the final paper. However, when asked to combine all the skills that they learned throughout the semester, most—but not all—students struggled to balance those two larger goals of literary analysis and advanced composition, managing (in most cases) to successfully implement one but "drop the ball" on the other. Generally speaking, then, I received either critically sophisticated literary analyses that lacked a clear thesis statement and/or effective organization; or thesis-driven and coherently organized papers that did not engage effectively with the novel under discussion (especially from those students who were not English majors). If students had been required to submit a full draft of the paper, they could have used my feedback to effectively revise their work and craft more sophisticated and/or organized final projects.

One comment that I received on my student evaluation summaries echoes and encapsulates my overall experience in this course: "I like how the class is a process that has forced me to be a better writer." While the student was most likely referring to the emphasis placed on the process of composition throughout the semester (with respect to revision, drafting, and weekly writing assignments), her comment also speaks to the structure of the class and the final outcome: ultimately, this course reflects *my* process, as I took on the challenge of designing my first 300-level subject-focused advanced writing course; and—if given the opportunity to implement a few crucial revisions to the course—I am certain that I could create a final product that more seamlessly balances content and composition.

Notes

[1] The following sources provide more detailed information on the feminist efforts that I have briefly mentioned here: *Women in England, 1760-1914: A Social History*, by Susie Steinbach; *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*, 8th edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt; and [The Victorian Web](#) [\[return to text\]](#)

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