

Promoting Research in an Undergraduate Shakespeare Course

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This essay concerns the methods I use in my 300-level Shakespeare course at Winthrop University to foster research worthy of frequent conference presentation and occasional publication. In short, my approach is to provide suitable topics and to require multiple stages in the composition and research process. The results, I have discovered, are sometimes phenomenal and clearly superior to the work students did when I first taught the course at Winthrop. I begin, therefore, by contrasting the first version of my Shakespeare course with my more recent efforts.

The fall 2000 course was problematic because it was based on faulty assumptions. Whereas students assumed that they could turn in a first draft and receive a high grade, I assumed that they would turn in something more polished. They also assumed that they knew how to pick proper topics and that they would receive decent grades for plot summary, incoherent analysis, or papers that did not support thesis statements; I assumed that they could identify decent topics on their own and knew basic things about argument and development. In other words, I overestimated my students' starting point, and they underestimated my expectations. As a result, the grading punished them for not knowing to begin with what they needed to learn.

Over the intervening years, I have developed a very different set of assumptions. The foremost is that, if students knew how to write a Shakespeare paper, they would not need to take my course. There is a place in the syllabus for a new critical “analysis” paper, but I now believe that students should write a *research* paper. At least once in their four years at the university, they need to have a professor shepherd them all the way through a multi-stage research process. A final assumption came to me from a senior colleague who stated, “Our students, if they think it doesn’t count, aren’t going to do it.” The remark prompted me to figure out how to use grades to motivate my students to develop their projects in stages: the writing project is now a significant part of the course grade, and “process points” reward dedicated engagement despite the absence of perfection along the way because students need multiple chances to get a paper right.

Out of one hundred points for the course, fifty are for the midterm, final, and oral participation; the other fifty are for the term project and break down into eight stages:

- Paper Proposal (2 full pages)
- New critical paper (5 full pages)
- Annotated bibliography (10 sources)
- Outline written in complete sentences and including research (4–5 pages)
- Full researched draft (at least 8 pages)
- Self-analytical cover letter (2 full pages)
- Conference abstract
- Final draft of researched essay

All are five-point assignments except for the new critical paper and the final researched draft, which are worth ten points apiece, but only the final draft receives a rubric-based grade. As a result, students can receive up to thirty points for nursing their projects through the writing process. On the final day of class, students turn in a folder containing, in this order, the cover letter, the conference abstract, the final draft, and the previous draft with my sheet of typed comments. Obviously, an eight-stage writing process requires not only a full semester's engagement by my students but also an enormous amount of grading by me. I could have assigned one paper, a midterm, and a final for a total of seventy-five items to grade. Instead I assign eight stages, a midterm, and a final, all of which times twenty-five students equal a total of 250 items that I must grade for Shakespeare class alone.

I describe the assignment to my students on the first day of class by laying out the assignment much as it appears in the previous paragraph. Yes, it is a lot of work for them and for me, but I point out that practically the only way to flunk the course is to skip the process assignments. Then I *sell* the assignment by stating that forty of the fifty points for the writing project are “process points.” They might at this point ask, “Why all the process points?” Multiple stages, I assert, compensate for students' human nature (procrastination); and besides, they certainly will not get the paper right on the first try. In fact, they need to have someone coach them through the proper process for developing a researched essay—a process that they can implement helpfully in other courses as well. If they work on their projects all semester, great things can be accomplished. “What kind of great things?” they might ask? Thirty-three percent of the students who took this class from me in the fall of 2009—eight out of twenty-five—presented their papers at conferences during spring 2010. Twenty-five percent of those who took

the course in fall 2010—seven out of twenty-five—presented their work at conferences during spring 2011. A spring 2008 student, Ms. Sally Shader, published her essay “‘The liquor is not earthly’: *The Tempest* and the Downfall of Native Americans” in *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*. And a fall 2009 student, Mr. James Funk, published “The Return of Logos: Language and Meaning in *Hamlet*” in *TOR*. (Both of these students are currently in master’s programs: Shader in history at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Funk in English at Clemson University.)

My sales pitch then presents quotations from former students’ portfolio cover letters. In a sense, the assignment speaks for itself.

- “As the end of the semester approaches, I have never felt more grateful than I am now of a professor [who] required my term paper in such small doses. With two other research papers that are due on the same day as this one, I did not have a final sprint to the finish, additional and unnecessary anxiety, or crippling amounts of hours to be spent at the last minute regarding this Shakespeare paper. I now wish that my other two papers were turned in in the same fashion. I have even taken time to apply some of these techniques to my other final papers.”
- “I am so glad that this paper had to be written in stages. Otherwise, it would probably be as terrible as some of the others I am turning in this same week ([they] are so terrible because I have been allowed to procrastinate in writing them). I have four other papers due right now[,] and two of them have not even been started.”

- “The biggest weakness I have is procrastinating. Thankfully the overall product required steps throughout the semester. Honestly, had the project not been structured as such, I would have done appallingly on this paper. Having pieces due at various times throughout the semester allowed me time to pick a more specific topic, refine my thesis, meet with Dr. Fike, and generally organize my thoughts and argument. The time required also allowed me to find more applicable sources and learn how to better locate sources for any research paper.”
- “I have learned that everyone is in charge of the quality of their own paper writing experience. If one procrastinates, fails to do the proper amount of research, or does not meet with Dr. Fike when they need help, the process will be unpleasant and stressful. However, if one carefully follows the process for each step, puts in the work, and asks for help if needed, this paper has the potential to be a highly enjoyable and satisfying learning experience.”
- “Each time a graded draft of my essay was returned, the lazy part of my personality would look over the comment sheet and complain, ‘It’s not good enough *yet!*’ Reluctantly, I would read over the comments and the paper, and as I reread my essay, new ideas would slowly start to connect in my brain. With each new epiphany, I would become prouder of my paper. I even had moments when I [couldn’t] resist the urge to do a little jig around my room while boasting, ‘I’m so smart,’ in a sing-song voice.”

One reason the cover letters are usually as positive as the above comments is that the stages of the assignment are laid out in detail on the [course Web site](#). The materials include a

lengthy overview of the eight stages, a list of approximately seventy paper topics, a slide show on the paper proposal, and separate assignment sheets on the annotated bibliography, the outline, and the abstract. Students' first step, then, is to select a topic; but cautionary words are in order: they should not pick *A Midsummer Night's Dream* just because it is the first play we read or *Macbeth* just because they studied it in high school. It is also important that not more than two students pick a given focused topic. One semester, a quarter of the class—six women—gravitated toward an excellent but deceptively difficult focus: Kate's final speech in *The Taming of the Shrew*. For good reasons, five of them wisely chose other topics. But even with just two students working on the same topic, there will be competition for library books, despite my lecture about the collegiality of sharing resources. Another reason not to double up is averse professor reaction: reading the same paper by two students is frustrating; reading the same paper by three or more students is intolerable. I use various methods to ensure that nearly everyone selects a different topic. I mention some topics that I would like someone to select. Students are also encouraged to write papers that engage with their individual minors (e.g., a psychology minor might apply the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to Hamlet or write a Freudian analysis of his re-enactment of the fall of Troy with the players). Then I require a *pre-proposal* in the form of a couple of sentences so that I can address any duplication before students write their proposals.

Proposal. The first step is to propose a specific approach to a selected play. Students may come up with their own topics (some do, and I often add these topics to my list), but most choose from among the term paper topics on the Web site. Ms. Shader's article provides an example of proper focus:

- Area of inquiry: *The Tempest*

- Topic: Caliban as a Native American
- Focus: Caliban and alcohol
- Tentative thesis: The way Stefano and Trinculo give Caliban alcohol illustrates the dark side of Europeans' colonization of North America.

There is not much time to work on the proposal, but it does not need to be flawless (it will receive full credit as long as it is long enough, reflects a genuine attempt to fulfill the assignment, and is written correctly). Although the proposal is very preliminary, students are encouraged to come up with a tentative thesis and as much supporting detail as possible so that the assignment opens an on-paper dialogue with me on how the project might develop. Of course, students must actually *read* their plays before writing their proposals. Like every other stage except the cover letter and the abstract, the first one concludes with a list of works cited, which normally includes only the student's play. (It is almost impossible to get even the best students to use the MLA format properly, but multiple attempts help improve correctness.)

New critical paper. Stage two develops the proposal in a five-page nonresearched analysis paper. The paper is usually written straight from the primary text. Some topics cannot be explored without a little bit of research, but students must limit themselves to reference texts like history books and primary sources such as the *OED*, a dictionary of mythology, and literary theory. They must leave the secondary research until later, for critics will otherwise take over their papers and poison the well. As David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen state in their rhetoric *Writing Analytically*, "looking at others' ideas may actually retard your learning process and leave you feeling that you couldn't possibly learn to arrive at ideas on your own" (298). The main goal of the assignment, then, is to continue to engage with the text and to refine the thesis

in connection with either a key passage from the play or an aggregate of related quotations. Since this is an *analysis* paper, students must go beyond explication to demonstrate a point. Whereas explication offers a detailed explanation of what something says, analysis uses what something says to support a controversial thesis statement. Summary and narration, if present at all, must be kept to a minimum and must serve a larger purpose—to educate an audience that has read the play but not thought about the focused topic in depth. In response, I make no marks whatsoever on the analysis papers but instead type substantive comments about each numbered paragraph. This strategy avoids discouraging students by losing the higher-order forest (ideas, argumentation) for the lower-order trees (mechanics, grammar, style).

Annotated bibliography. Once students have some preliminary ideas on paper, it is time to begin the research process with a lecture by a reference librarian in the library’s “electronic classroom,” which is fitted out with twenty-four computer terminals. The librarian introduces students to the difference between citation, abstract, and full text; databases such as the MLA Bibliography, JSTOR, Literature Resource Center, and Literature Resources from Gale; and the online catalog, plus services like inter-library loan and the Partnership Among South Carolina Libraries (a lending and delivery service). Before the lecture, students receive an up-to-date handout on resources for doing research on Shakespeare; and at the end of the hour they have time to look for sources on the MLA Bibliography.

The annotated bibliography must consist of at least ten sources—a Shakespeare play and at least nine critical sources (articles and books written about it). A temptation at this stage is to shovel nine randomly selected sources about the play into the bibliography without regard for coherence. That is why I have students write their focused topics at the top of their

bibliographies, and I insist that the critical sources be directly related. An abstract may be a fragment starting with the word “argues” or a short paragraph, but it must identify the source’s thesis statement, not merely state its subject. Moreover, the abstracts must be of the students’ own composition (not cut and pasted from an electronic source). Students do not have to read all their sources straight through at this stage, but they do have to read far enough into them to be able to identify each one’s thesis. My response often includes suggestions for further reading. I “spot” them three points and then assign a half point for each of the following: number of sources, alphabetical order, identification of the sources’ theses in the abstracts, and proper use of the MLA format. A single error in any of these categories, however, means the deduction of a half point.

Researched outline. The goal of the next assignment is to prepare students to write their drafts and to enable me to point out marginally any major problems when they can be more easily spotted and fixed. The outline should be written in complete sentences; merges the students’ insights from their analysis papers with their research; cites primary material from the play, at least five critical sources, and necessary background material; and constitutes an abbreviated form of the paper (“the paper writ small,” as I like to call it). Primary and secondary quotations must be present here, along with proper citations and correct works cited entries. I also insist that students use the proper outline format, which my assignment sheet models with a thesis at the top followed by a structure of upper-case Roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numerals, and lower case letters. Commentary on the outlines, as on the annotated bibliographies, is done by hand with a mechanical pencil. I either clear students to write their drafts or suggest that they first do further research and development.

Researched draft. With the outline in good shape, students cast their material in a full draft of their research papers, which should be at least eight to ten pages of text plus a works cited page. It can be longer provided that the paper remains narrowly focused, and the best papers are often substantially longer; however, if it is shorter than eight full pages, the student will need to work on development. Like the previous stage, the paper incorporates at least five critics' statements: students must use critics to buttress their own arguments, rather than drawing too heavily on one or two sources or creating a patchwork of multiple critics' opinions (that is, a "book report" instead of a thesis-driven term paper). Along with submitting a hardcopy, students send their papers to the university's plagiarism checker, turnitin.com, whose purpose is to help identify any misuse of borrowed information (the system is a pedagogical tool at this stage). My response to the drafts includes typed comments *and* marginal notations of lower-order errors. Because of the staging of previous assignments, most of the drafts are in good shape, though a few students may still need to back up and do more research.

Final draft and portfolio. As previously stated, the final draft is the only stage that receives a rubric-based grade. Students do not resubmit the paper to turnitin.com, but anyone who waits until now to submit his/her paper to the system gets the stick rather than the carrot if plagiarism is present. I make very few comments at this stage. In fact, I usually make no comments at all, having commented extensively on multiple stages early in the semester when doing so spurs improvement. In the accompanying self-analytical cover letters, students reflect on their writing process. Although called a letter, the document is formatted as a paper; students either address me in second person or refer to me in third person. Matters to address include (but are not limited to) the student's writing process, problems encountered and solutions achieved,

the paper's current strengths and weaknesses, questions about the final draft, and any insights on the process of literary research. Since many of the papers will "have legs" beyond the final submission for the course, the portfolio also includes an abstract that can be revised later on for submission to a conference such as the National Conference on Undergraduate Research, the Big South Undergraduate Research Symposium, or my own department's annual student research conference.

Following the completion of the semester, I keep a list of students whose papers are good enough for conference presentation and invite them to my office to work on their abstracts. We edit their abstracts together and submit them electronically to conferences and to Winthrop University's abstract book, *Undergraduate Research in the College of Arts and Sciences*, which is distributed to student scholars at the annual Celebration of Undergraduate Research in the College of Arts and Sciences. Once papers are accepted, I help students edit/compress their work for presentation. When the rare paper is good enough to be submitted to *The Oswald Review*, I also help with final revisions.

In conclusion, I recall the university's former vice president's words to my new faculty cohort in the fall of 2000. He stated, "Our students are smarter than they think they are." My experiences over the last eleven years have proven him to be right. As this essay demonstrates, turning that potential into performance worthy of presentation or publication is highly labor-intensive both for them and for me. But the multi-stage process just described has been consistently successful not just in getting the most from them as students but also in maximizing my effectiveness as a teacher.

Works Cited

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